

November 9, 2025
Job 19:23-27a

Pentecost 22
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“The Word Abides”

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth ...”

The National Archives in Washington, DC is an independent branch of the US government charged with the preservation and documentation of government and historical records. Its online catalog makes available over 160 million records ranging from the founding of the nation to the modern era. These digitized records represent only a small fraction of the over thirteen billion pages in the Archives’ holdings. While scholars often make use of these many documents, the most popular documents housed in the Archives are the founding documents of the USA: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These original documents are displayed in climate-controlled glass cases that are stored in heavily protected vaults when not on public display. Because of the significance of these documents in the history of the nation, the Archives is one of the most frequently visited sites in the US Capital. As one of many American students who grew up studying these founding documents, I was excited when I finally had the opportunity to visit Washington, DC and see these original documents in the handwriting of the Founding Fathers. After visiting the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the Capitol building, I lined up with my classmates to glimpse these items that played such a critical role in both the history and modern life of my home country. The anticipation grew as we approached the rotunda where the documents are displayed, and when it was finally our turn, we came upon the original copies that we had studied for so long – and were very disappointed. While there was no question that these were the original manuscripts upon which the USA is founded, they were so faded due to the ravages of time that they were barely legible. Efforts have been made to restore the documents, but the reality of time and the materials used in their writing in the 18th Century means that the words originally written have faded from view. While of course they have been preserved in numerous other ways, the words written by those who founded the land of my birth have fallen victims to the realities of time in which so many things fade away.

The challenge for archivists and other protectors of historical records is to preserve the words written on such historical documents before time and the elements cause them to fade from view. My seminary in Philadelphia is home to the Lutheran Archives for the northeastern synods of the ELCA and features a climate-controlled

room in which are housed many important artifacts of our church's history and heritage, including Bibles with Martin Luther's original handwriting. While the Archives does a good job of preserving the documents in its possession, sadly many of these historical records had been poorly stored before they arrived at the Archives, and even the best efforts of the archivists cannot recover words that have faded from view. The same reality is true in many of the church cemeteries in the Philadelphia area where the headstones that record the stories of the persons buried beneath them have faded to the point where they are mostly illegible. Like so many items from history, it is sadly true that *"time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away."* (ELW Hymn 632).

The desire to find a means to preserve important words and documents can be heard in today's first lesson from the book of Job, which is considered the greatest monument of wisdom literature in the Old Testament. The story of a man who suffers unjustly is one of the oldest and most famous stories in Scripture; Martin Luther considered Job *"magnificent and sublime as no other book of Scripture."* The story of Job is so popular that a phrase that has found its way into modern usage is to speak of someone who has unusual endurance as having the *"patience of Job,"* which is rooted in a reference in the letter of James (*"You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."* – James 5:11). In the main part of the book, however, Job is anything but the paragon of patience; he responds to his suffering by cursing the day he was born (*"Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'a man-child is conceived.'"* – Job 3:3) and *"his spirit gathers the fury of a tempest as he hurls his protests to God."* (Bernhard W. Anderson). As the book begins, Job is presented as a man renowned for his piety and blessed with divine favour that accompanied his righteousness (*"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."* – 1:1). But Job's sincerity was suspect to one of the members of the Heavenly Council – Satan (*"the Accuser"*). Satan is presented here not as the archenemy of God but rather as an angel in good standing in the Heavenly Council (*"Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him."* – Zechariah 3:1); in this context, Satan's special function is to investigate affairs on earth. When the LORD boasts about his servant Job (*"Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil."* – 1:8), Satan suspects that Job's service was motivated by self-interest (*"you have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land"* – 1:10). Satan then makes a wager with the LORD that if Job's prosperity and family are taken away his faith would be destroyed (*"But stretch*

out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” – 1:11). The LORD accepts the wager, and Job’s fortunes take a downward turn as he loses his prosperity and family; but at first *“in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing”* (Job 1:22). Job is then stricken with sores from head to foot, making it necessary for him to sit along in the city’s refuse ground (*“Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes”* 2:8); but ignoring his wife’s advice, *“in all this Job did not sin with his lips”* (2:10). At this point three of Job’s friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – come to comfort him in his plight and remain with him throughout the next several chapters of the book. In the end, the LORD accepts Job’s prayer and restored him twice as much as he had before this period of suffering. As in all good folktales, Job lived *“happily ever after”* (*“After this Job lived for one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.”* – 42:16-17). But the words of Job in the body of the book are not those of a man who would be an example of patience in suffering; Job is a man obsessed with vindication and desperate for something to be left behind to attest to his innocence:

- “His good name has been destroyed; his ties to kin, family, and friends have been dissolved; and his body is disintegrating – being taken apart, being reduced to bones, teeth, and flesh. But this goes beyond the physical. Job’s entire self is being dismantled by this unjust persecution and by the painful realization that God either is not hearing him or is not a trustworthy judge. And so, he longs for a physical record that will endure.” – Anna Marsh.

In spite of his friends’ efforts to help Job understand the cause of his suffering, Job rejects any of their reasons for his plight and even has parodied and rejected the language of prayer (*“Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me! Why do you, like God, pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh?”* – 19:21-22). Lamenting that his outcry brings no response or justice (*“Even when I cry out, ‘Violence!’ I am not answered; I cry aloud; but there is no justice.”* – 19:7), Job concludes that there is no way for him to bring his words before God. Having previously struggled to find a way to keep his cry for justice alive after his death (*“O earth, do not cover my blood; let my outcry find no resting place ... for when a few years have come, I shall go the way from which I shall not return”* (16:18-22)). Although Job laments that he has failed in finding access to God, he still clings to the hope that some day, somehow, a reconciliation will take place. In words that are among the most well-known in all the Old Testament, Job expresses his desire that his words will be preserved as a future testimony: *“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!”* (19:23-24). Job describes three

materials on which his words might be recorded – a scroll, lead tablet, and engraved rock – each more enduring than the last. As God had instructed the prophet Habakkuk to “*write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it*” (2:2), Job wants his words to be recorded on media that will endure the ravages of time and the elements so that his words might last long after his life ends.

The words that Job wants to be preserved are similar to his earlier declaration that “*even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high*” (16:19) as he boldly proclaims that “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the least he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*” (19:25-27a). The “Redeemer” (*go-el*) of which Job speaks is a kinsman-defender, a term that comes from the field of family law. It designates the nearest male relative, who was responsible for protecting a person’s interests when that individual was unable to do so. The *go-el* would buy back family property sold in distress, recover that which had been stolen, redeem a relative sold into slavery, and avenge a murdered kinsman’s blood.

- “If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next-of-kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.” – Leviticus 25:25.
- “Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, ‘Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.’ Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.” – Jeremiah 32:8.
- “Then she said, ‘Please, may the king keep the LORD your God in mind, so that the avenger of blood may kill no more, and my son not be destroyed.’ He said, ‘As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.’” – 2 Samuel 14:11.

The *go-el* is the embodiment of family solidarity; Job is now seeking such a person to defend his interests. Job “*places himself in the hands of a redeemer. Such a person is able to buy back what another person, usually a family member, has lost. It is a role for someone who above all is willing to listen.*” (Lawrence Wood).

While the *go-el* usually refers to a person to whom one can turn for assistance, the close similarity between Job’s words here and in his previous pronouncement that “*my eye pours out tears to God, that he would maintain the right of a mortal with*

God as one does for a neighbour” (16:20-21) suggests that the “Redeemer” that Job seeks is a heavenly figure, similar to the intercessory angel later in the book:

- “Then, if there should be for one of them an angel, a mediator, one of a thousand, one who declares a person upright, and he is gracious to that person ... than he prays to God, and is accepted by him, he comes into his presence with joy, and God repays him for his righteousness.” – 33:23-26.

For Job, his *go-el* supplies the certainty that there is someone with the power and presence to take up his case with God. While Job describes his certainty that a Redeemer will arise and vindicate him after his death, he also seeks a vindication that he can experience before he dies, in his flesh and with his own eyes.

- “Job has the temerity to imply that his Redeemer is the Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth. This breathtaking confidence, faith or effrontery is what redeems Job and makes him much more than just a figure of pity. He becomes, on the spot, a three-dimensional person.” – Wood.

Job’s desire to write his words so that they may be read by future generations is also the word proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah in his declaration that “*the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*” (Isaiah 40:8). It is the word of assurance heard in the words of Psalm 46 that “*the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold*” (Psalm 46:7) that inspired Martin Luther to include in his famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* the bold assertion that “*God’s Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes who fear it; for God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit.*” Like a *go-el* who intercedes on behalf of a loved one, our Redeemer is the one who is the very Word of God among us, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us from all that would enslave us or separate us from God’s love and all that God desires for God’s beloved children.

- “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The words of Job may bring back memories of a time when we heard these words at one of the saddest moments of our life. They are words that are often spoken as we gather at a graveside or at the final resting place of the earthly remains of a loved one who has died. As we stand in that place where the finality of death often hits home in a profound way, we hear Job's words of confident assurance that in spite of all the suffering he has endured he still knows that his Redeemer lives and that the day will surely come when his vindicator will redeem him and restore to him that which appears to have been lost. These words that I had spoken at countless gravesides took on new meaning for me on November 15, 1999, when I stood at my father's grave as he was laid to rest. As I was mourning his death and coming to terms with life without him, Job's words gave me that blessed assurance that because our Redeemer lives, not even death can *"separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:39).

- "There will be dark days, days of loss and days of failure, but they will not last forever. The light will always return to chase away the darkness, the sun will always come out again after the rain, and the human spirit will always rise above failure. Fear will assault us, but we will not be afraid, 'for Thou art with me.'" – Harold S. Kushner.

The words on the original documents in the National Archives may have faded, but the ideas that stand at the foundation of my homeland will endure even through the present trials and temptations that the nation is enduring. In this month of remembering both the saints who from their labours rest and those who gave their lives for the sake of our nation, may we always remember that even as words written or spoken may fade, one word stands forever: the Word of God which is ours in the Word that became flesh and lives among us, the good news that is our blessed assurance because *"I know that my Redeemer lives!"*

Amen.