

WE BELIEVE

The first of three homilies on Augsburg's vision

Job 19: 1-7, 14-27

[Augsburg College Chapel, 5 September 2008]

“From faith there flows a love and joy in the Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss.”

(Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*)

Two years ago, I stood in this pulpit offering my first homily as Augsburg's president and I chose to preach on Jesus' question of Peter as recounted in the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel: “Who do you say that I am?” This invitation to Peter and to all of us to state our faith, to proclaim our *credo*, was, I contended, central to our life as a college that embraces the intersections of faith and learning. I still believe that is the case and I have found the opportunities to learn about the many faith stories in the Augsburg community to be one of the great joys of my work in your midst.

Today I come at the beginning of my third year as president to extend Jesus' invitation not simply to you as individual members of the Augsburg community, but to Augsburg as institution. Over the past year or so, we have begun to talk about the vision of Augsburg College, which we have stated this way: We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. It is a vision statement that resonates deeply with the legacy and promise, the commitments and values, the aspirations and reality, of our college. And it begins with a statement of faith: We believe... Later this fall, I will offer some thoughts about ‘we are called’ and ‘to serve our neighbor’ – the other two components of the vision – but today we begin where we are firmly grounded: in our faith. And we are reminded by the words of our ancestor, Martin Luther, that it is “from faith” that there flows all else: love and joy in the Lord; and the joyful, free and willing mind that serves the neighbor with no account of personal gain or loss. We believe.

So what are we offered as scripture for this morning – assigned for the day – but the well-known and distressing story of Job, the afflicted one? I nearly decided to look for a more fitting text, but I love the discipline of the lectionary, the assigned readings for every day, and I stuck with it. And as I reflected on these verses from the 19th chapter of Job, I began to realize just how powerfully they spoke to the ways in which faith and learning are inextricably bound up in our character and work as a college.

Now, I do remember the last time I thought about Job when it was an assigned reading for a humanities course I was teaching at Wabash College. It was on the syllabus right in the middle of the semester, which, I assumed, was planned as a way of helping students to recognize that, despite what they thought to be a pretty tough life in college, it all paled in comparison to Job's terrible afflictions. And it worked – doing a few mid-term exams and papers, eating cafeteria food and having squabbles with your roommate really didn't seem to matter much when presented with Job's physical pain, relationship woes and sense of divine abandonment. It worked because Job's reality is, in a very real sense, the human reality

(albeit in a most intensive fashion!) and it is a reality that we spend a lot of time exploring and analyzing and studying here at this college. We might say that Job's reality is the "stuff" of a liberal arts education.

In the opening verses of the 19th chapter, Job pretty much sums it all up in his response to his friends: "How long will you torment me? I call for help, but there is no justice. My relatives have failed me...My bones stick to my skin and flesh...Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, for the hand of God has touched me!"

If you recall the whole story, you have some sense of Job's plight. A faithful man, a good husband and father and friend, a lover of the Lord – and yet all of these horrors befall him. Why would God do this to him, his family and friends ask? Abandon your God – curse the one who tortures you in this way, they challenge him. The evidence does not support your loyalty and faith. And so it doesn't, and so it doesn't.

And here is the important connection to our work as a college. In the teaching and learning that happens in this college – in the classroom, the residence halls, the cafeteria, the playing fields and stages, and in the community – we learn so much about the human condition, about the differences between what is right and what is wrong in the world, about all that is unjust, all that seems undeserved, even about what is mysterious – this is an important part of what it means to be educated. You will learn to analyze social and personal and physical challenges. You will seek understanding and be amazed by the evidence of a world that is shaped by mixed motivations, by evil and good, by apathy and passion, by a lack of compassion and genuine altruism. You may be just like Job's friends and family who, faced with the evidence, don't see a path to redemption and hope. The evidence is all there is. And there it all might end if not for the soaring proclamation of faith from Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."

Here is the statement of faith that allows Job – that allows all of us – to learn from and experience a world that often doesn't make sense, that fends off the arc of justice in the universe, that can seem arbitrary and capricious. Here is faith that grounds all that we are and do. Here is faith that seeks understanding but is not surprised when understanding is not enough.

There are, in this remarkable story of Job, at least three ways to think about what faith means to our lives.

Surely there is no way to grasp Job's proclamation of faith in light of his situation without seeing faith, first and foremost, as a gift. How is it possible to have suffered as Job has suffered and still be able to say, "I know that my Redeemer lives"? To believe this much, this deeply, this confidently in spite of the evidence is a gift not to be coveted or expected, but to be received – we are chosen by God to be God's child, to become a part of God's family. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, appears despite the evidence, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever – and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people. Faith is God's gift to Augsburg as well – the gift that makes possible all that we do here – that frees us to explore and study and investigate and experiment and live confidently in a world where our gifts are so needed.

Job's story also reveals what it means to see faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a person of faith. It seems to me that Job's story offers all of us a way to understand how our calls arise from the tension between the evidence – all that we come to know and understand about the world's needs – and the gift of faith that frees us to serve our neighbor, to do God's work, to be joyful in the Lord. At Augsburg, this idea of faith as call forms us to see that there is not necessarily one destination point – one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith – faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy, working to make the world more just and compassionate, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to challenge the systems that perpetuate violence and hatred. Faith is the call to an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected, that puts all that we learn and understand and experience in service to God's will for God's world.

Finally, Job illustrates what it means to see faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait and work patiently and prayerfully for God's will to be done. And Job does wait – his story and afflictions go on many more chapters, and things end well – just so you know. It is faith as promise, setting a new horizon to our lives. This is faith as promise, reaching to a deeper place in our individual and common lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to care for each other and to be faithful partners in the work we are called to do; to learn how healing is as much about broken systems and hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come. For Augsburg, faith as promise is the deeper well, the longer horizon, the belief in redemption that allows us to continue to do what we are called to do – to ask our questions, to seek our evidence, to live into God's will for our lives.

Faith as gift, call and promise – faith as a life unfolding. Each day at this college, we join together to proclaim “Lord, I believe” – I believe in your gift, your call, your promise – even as we admit, “help my unbelief” – my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. We face the evidence of all our learning and experience, with all of the lessons of paradox and affliction, firm and confident in our faith, not that the evidence is wrong – nobody doubts Job's suffering – but that the evidence is not all there is. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace!

This is the faith that seeks understanding and that makes genuine learning possible, that grounds all that we are and do as a college. “We believe”, we proclaim, and in that bold statement of faith, we engage the world in all its tensions and messiness, so that we might be God's own in God's world. I know that my Redeemer lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.