



Bishop's Reflection

NEW BEGINNINGS

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Most of us remember what we were doing when a specific world tragedy took place. Some remember with profound clarity the exact moment they learned about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, or when the Twin Towers were hit by airplanes. One of those moments for me was when Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France caught fire in April of 2019. Having grown up in a French culture, it was most distressing to watch that icon of faith, resilience and human creativity go up in flames. Over the years, I had prayed there many times, and it felt profoundly personal.

Notre Dame Cathedral is now rising from the ashes. The restoration work is advancing and the recent news is that it will reopen to visitors and the faithful at the end of 2024. The cathedral's iconic 315 foot-high spire that dramatically collapsed in the flames, is being recreated and will gradually begin to reappear this year. It will be an inspiring symbol of the cathedral's rebirth. The army general in charge of the immense project, Gen. Jean-Louis Georgelin, shared that, "The return of the spire in Paris' sky will in my opinion be the symbol that we are winning the battle..." The reconstructed cathedral will look exactly as it did previously, but will actually be even stronger and more resilient.

I find the restoration of Notre Dame Cathedral an inspiring symbol of how God spiritually "can make all things new." Each spring season, I am reminded of the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, the 7th century Christian mystic, that while in this world "we breathe the air of the resurrection."



Years ago, I took someone who is a musician to Westminster Abbey in London. While in front of the composer George Frederic Handel's grave, dated 1762, she read the words from the ancient figure of Job that are on his gravestone - "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Upon reading those words, she could not hold back her tears, for they were words that profoundly echoed her own experience of God in the midst of life's difficulties. These were Handel's favorite words in the Scriptures. In his famous English oratorio, *Messiah*, composed in London during the summer of 1741 and premiered in Dublin, Ireland in April 1742, these words from Job form the heart of his soprano aria.

During the time Handel was composing that work, the story is told that Handel's assistant walked into Handel's room after shouting to him for several minutes with no response. The assistant reportedly found Handel in tears, and when asked what was wrong, Handel held up the musical score to this movement and said, "I thought I saw the face of God."



Marc Chagall, *Job Praying*, 1960, color lithograph

"I know that my redeemer liveth" are perhaps the most hopeful words in all the Scriptures. Frequently, as I travel throughout the Diocese, I meet people who are deeply discouraged, with some even having a sense of hopelessness. Often in their sharing they are echoing the line in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "In the middle of this road we call life, I found myself in a dark wood, with no clear path through." Yet, hope is the very fulcrum upon which faith in God rests as followers of Christ. There is an intricate link between hope and God's faithfulness. And I have always found the words of God to Job, in his profound despair, of great encouragement. In the Book of Job, we read, "The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind..." Within the turbulence of his life God comes to him. The story of Job is really about finding and maintaining hope in the midst of the worst that life can throw at one.

The story of Job needs to be seen in the context of his profound personal statement of belief, found in the middle of the book, when he cries out, "I know that my Redeemer lives." The foundation of Job's belief-system rests in knowing he has a redeemer, a rescuer, who can turn life around and give him new life.

In this Book of Job, an ancient prose poem, Job goes through more personal tragedy, life disappointments, and discouragements, than anyone else in the Scriptures. He loses his children, occupation, everything he owns, health, and closest friends. Even his wife turns against him. Job finds himself in a state of perpetual suffering, facing one disaster upon another, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Perhaps no artist captures the suffering of Job on canvas more poignantly than the 20th century Russian Jewish artist Marc Chagall, whose numerous moving portrayals of Job lead the viewer to deep empathy.



“[We] weren’t sure someone would look for [us].”

I recall the remarkable story of the rescue of the 33 Chilean miners back in 2010. Millions of people watched, as they emerged from the San Jose Mine after more than two months (69 days) trapped underground. They were brought up one at a time, some 2000 feet, in a claustrophobic Phoenix rescue capsule, which took up to two hours to get to the surface. Some had to be blindfolded and sedated to keep them calm on the way up. The first one out, said, “There are no words to describe what it’s like down there!” They lived in the shadow of near-certain death for 17 days, after the cave-in, before rescuers on the surface made contact with them. They were desperate days, when they had to go without eating, and sometimes they couldn’t see because of the dust. Some were simply “waiting for death.” From time to time they would feel strong explosions in the shafts surrounding them, and they would panic.

Each of the 33 men has their own tale of survival of how they coped with being stuck nearly half a mile below the earth in an underground tomb. However, the oldest of the miners, Mario Gomez, 63, was credited with helping to build a tightly organized system that held the group together, and was central in keeping hopelessness to a minimum. One of the first things Mr. Gomez did was to organize a



makeshift chapel to offer spiritual support, which was used a lot. And he shared how he dropped to his knees in prayer time and time again. When asked what gave him the strength and hope in the midst of it all, he admitted that there were times when he felt hopeless. “[We] weren’t sure someone would look for [us]” he recalled.

Yet, during his “dark nights of the soul,” there in the darkness of the mine, in the midst of his most discouraging hour, he said he found hope by reminding himself of previous personal experiences of rescue. He had been in the mining business for 30 years. He had closely followed the story of a miraculous rescue of the miners in China in 2009 who were trapped for 25 days. Furthermore, he heard that above ground, the rescue camp had been named “Camp Hope.” And over and over again he reminded himself that the space they were primarily confined to underground,

had already been named, before the cave-in, “the refuge.” In reminding himself of all this, he found that he was able to remain hopeful.

Additionally, Mr. Gomez, during this time of entrapment, found it helpful to remind himself of the true nature of their situation. Yes, they were trapped. But, they had oxygen, were getting food supplies daily, and the best minds and most advanced technology in the world were working non-stop to rescue them. So paradoxically, the true reality of their context served to encourage him, providing him the reassurance needed. Interestingly, they nicknamed the six-inch wide supply tubes, that were sent down with food and other essentials, “doves.” It was a reference to hope, referring to Noah letting the dove out of the ark to see if there was dry land. The saw those narrow containers as their “umbilical cord,” representing life to them.

At the end of the day, Job is able to find deep hope in God's promised faithfulness. This is what he means when he exclaims, "I know that my Redeemer lives." In the language of Hebrew, the word "know" refers to "a knowledge based on previous experience." It was an experiential and existential knowledge. Throughout the Book of Job, we see Job consciously recalling God's faithfulness to him. Nothing encourages us more than taking a close look at the character of God, which indeed is the truest reality. Job chooses to refer to his Creator, the Eternal One, as a "redeemer" - as one who is ultimately about restoring and rescuing. Regardless of the hardships he faced, Job threw himself upon the beautiful character of God.

God is in the business of giving people new beginnings. This is the reason that the story of Job almost has a 'happily-ever-after' ending. We are told that not only is Job's life restored, but that God gives him twice as much of everything - family, friends, possessions, etc. In the Hebraic literary genre in which this story is written, this kind of over-the-top dramatic ending is used to communicate something very powerful - that this is the nature of our beautiful Creator.

In the middle of the greatest suffering of his life, Job finds himself able to say with the utmost confidence those words that have rung down through the millennia: "I know that my Redeemer lives."

There is always all the hope in the world. I am reminded of a prayer written by the late Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist who was exiled for many years from the former Soviet Union, after having spent eight years in Stalin's Gulag. He went on to become the most acclaimed contemporary Russian author of the 20th century, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970. Still in the Soviet Union at that time, he wasn't allowed to attend the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden, so he sent his lecture to be read for him. He ended with this beautiful prayer below.

How easy it is to live with You, O Lord
How easy to believe in You.
When my spirit is overwhelmed within me,
When even the keenest see no further than
the night.

And know not what to do tomorrow,
You bestow on me the certitude
That you exist and are mindful of me,
That all the paths of righteousness are not barred.

As I ascend into the hill of earthly glory,
I turn back and gaze, astonished, on the road
That led me here beyond despair...

~Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

