

“Redemption”
Exodus 6:2-9, Luke 19:1-10
November 3, 2019

Over fifty years ago a car rental company decided to try something new: Avis told potential customers “We Try Harder” because they were merely #2. Hertz, you might remember, was #1. Their slogan was “Let Hertz put you in the driver’s seat.” Avis persisted for decades, only dropping their campaign in the last few years. However, their campaign didn’t have the intended effect - Avis never did become #1. In fact, they slipped to #3, while in the meantime Hertz fell to #2. Enterprise is the new #1. So much for the virtue of perseverance.

Yet, this morning’s scripture lessons deal with two situations that are almost opposites of each other, yet they are similar in that they deal with circumstances that appeared as if they could not be changed - but ultimately were - through perseverance. In one, God had to persevere to win an entire people; in the other, one lone individual had to persevere to gain his immortal soul.

We might think that for God to persevere would be pretty easy. Isn’t that what God does? God has all the time in the world, and then some. And, God can be rather patient - what’s the scriptural phrase? Slow to anger, but quick to forgive. True, there are many other ways that God’s character can be described. In a small church in London, there is a motto engraved in the stone walls - a motto that much of the world, Christian or otherwise, has come to know: “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.”

Now, we hear a lot about how God is all-powerful, but forget that God wants to achieve divine ends in partnership with humanity, not by being at cross-purposes with us. We suppose that God could do whatever He liked whenever He liked - but God hasn’t, has He? God could have stopped Atilla the Hun, or abolished slavery, or put an end to Hitler, or gotten rid of Saddam Husayn - you can pick your favorite villain - with a mere thought of His mind. But God left the nuts-and-bolts of those tasks up to us. God could have saved humanity from itself without going through the agony of seeing His own

Chosen One go through a very ugly death at Calvary at the hands of some very ugly people; but God didn't. That's not how God operates. After all, we teach our children that they should not expect everything to be handed to them on a silver platter; can we expect anything else from our own Father in heaven?

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, God announced to Moses who He was, what He proposed to do for Israel, and why He wanted to do it. God was offering to a desperate people in a desperate situation a Way Out: salvation from hunger, redemption from slavery, freedom from pain and suffering, and the offer of security. As proof of His good intentions, so to speak, God told Moses what had never been told to anyone ever before - something that had not been revealed to Abraham, the father of the Israelite tribes. It had not been shown to Noah, through whose righteousness the whole of creation and humanity had been preserved and redeemed from the flood. Even Adam and Eve had not been privy to this information.

God told Moses His Name. Now, you might not think that this was terribly earthshaking, but in those days it was. Remember how God let Adam name all the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, the creatures of the deep? By so doing, God was giving humanity rule and dominion over them all. Knowing the name of something gave you an insight into their very nature, their true inner being - straight to the heart.

But were the Israelites impressed? Not at all. At the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the Israelites had other things on their minds. And when we think of it, who could blame them? They were hungry. They were poor. They were slaves. They had need of answers that dealt with pressing physical realities. The here-and-now had to be satisfied. Revolutionaries the world over understand this: if you give the people bread for their empty stomachs, they'll listen to whatever fairy tales you want to tell them. For how can we save a man's soul when his body is on the point of perishing?

But as we all know, Israel wouldn't listen the first time, or the second, or the third. Yet, God didn't give up. Just because Israel wasn't ready for the Good News once didn't

mean that they weren't to be given a second chance; and a third; and a fourth. It took some nudging and a little bit of coaxing; and even when you look at God's people today, we still wonder if the message has ever really gotten through. But God keeps trying! He didn't give up after 50 years, like Avis Rent-a-Car did. Thousands of years later, God is still at it - calling for you, and for me.

In our New Testament lesson, Luke tells us a story about a man who persevered to receive salvation. Zaccheus had a lot of things going against him. He had a sordid past; he had a bad reputation because of that past; he had a lot of ground to make up to arrive at the Kingdom, a lot of atonement, much amends because of who he was and what he had done.

People didn't like Zaccheus. Tax collectors were noted extortionists and robbers. As a result, Zaccheus was rejected by his compatriots. And so, what did he do? Did he feel sorry for himself? Maybe for a while... Did he turn inward and reject human society? Perhaps to a certain extent... Did he return hate for hate? That could very well be. But when faced with a Stranger who had something good to say concerning just about everyone - even about people like Zaccheus himself - the tax collector was ready to reach out for the love of God even though he had been denied the happiness of the love of his fellow man.

But how was Zaccheus to find and see that Stranger who preached the love of God for all? Zaccheus had to go out into the streets to see Him. That sounds easy enough, except when you think that being in a crowd might be dangerous for someone like him. People might take the opportunity to elbow him "accidentally on purpose," to crush his toes with a well-placed heel; they might even knife him. Anyone like Zaccheus was taking his life into his own hands in a crowd. But Zaccheus was desperate to see this new Man, this Stranger. Zaccheus persevered. Nothing would stop him.

Finally, once contact with Jesus had been made, Zaccheus let his actions prove his new-found salvation. By the law of Israel, he was not required to return four times more

than he had stolen - only one and one-fifth was required to make good. But Zaccheus was determined to show that he was changed - that salvation wasn't something that just guaranteed you a place in Eternity, but made a difference in what you do here, in this life, to your brothers and sisters, to your people, to all creatures of our God and King. And so Zaccheus didn't stop when a kind word from Christ came his way. Instead, he continued in his new-found path.

These two stories of perseverance - of God reaching out to us, and our response of reaching back to God, despite ourselves, are what this Table, set before us, is all about: about God's persistence in making sure that we have every opportunity to find grace, to make amends, to gain redemption. For God never gives up on us ... just as Zaccheus never gave up on Jesus.

Let us pray: