

Sunday, November 10: Job 19:23-27a

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

When I was a new pastor I imagined that I was breaking new ground, doing things differently than older colleagues. Funerals, for example—folks liked it when funerals were called “celebrations of life” and involved lots of personal stories about the deceased. “Your service was so *personal*,” a friend of the widow might gush. “I’ve been to so many that were *impersonal*.” The likelihood that this personal approach had been around forever, and was trite in its own way, hadn’t yet set in. But an enterprising funeral home director liked what he saw and offered me a spot on his payroll if I would show him how to gather and tell these “personal” stories. Was there a template for it?

Well, yes and no. It was really just about listening. I’d get the family together and let them talk about their loved one, then ask questions chronologically and encourage them to ramble. It took some time to put the stories in order, flesh out the themes, apply a little rouge to the cheeks and present the result.

The funeral director wanted speed. It was his idea that “personal” services would transform the industry when matched with rapid production methods. His staff began using a formula—a few personal details larded with references to the Depression or World War II or the 1960s, and juicy memories of family meals. Eventually he built a franchise. In addition to personalized video tributes, his staff offered decorative attachments for caskets—fishing emblems for fishermen, poker baize for poker players and insert panels celebrating a favorite sports team.

Job wants something else entirely. He doesn’t particularly need a memorial to his hobbies, habits or even his dearest kin, whom he has lost in the most random way. He simply wants an encounter with the living God. He wants to have it out, face-to-face, with the One responsible for his place on earth. If all memory of him is blotted out, so be it—“Let the day perish in which I was born,” he says—as long as his stubborn, bruised faith continues to sing out after he is gone. “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! For I know that my Redeemer lives . . .”

It is heartbreaking to consider Job's anguish, the obscurity, the utter annihilation that faces him. Suddenly childless, penniless, bereft even of his wife's love, he could well wonder if the universe is impersonal. Yet he does not ask to be remembered. He cries out instead for his *praise* to survive.

An iron pen will outlast a mortal man. In ancient times, even though writing instruments were fragile and documents not terribly durable, words still had a greater life expectancy than human beings. Many people since then have put great hopes in literary immortality, or what Vladimir Nabokov called "the secret of durable pigments." Job's pen has not only iron but irony—for even though he says he is passing away, both his grief and his praise are imperishable.

Faced with the end of personhood, all of us turn into Job. We may approach religious life as if it were about us, our survival of this world, our way into heaven, our souls in eternity. At the end our loved ones are consumers on our behalf, investing in final memorabilia, pulling together boards of photographs, sports trophies, old service uniforms, needlepoint and even that horrible lamp given as a joke at Christmas.

But Job doesn't cling to such things. Instead he 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.

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 so much more than just a figure of pity. He becomes, on the spot, a three-dimensional person.

When the poet John Keats lay dying, he thought that nothing of him would survive. Little of his poetry had been published; at 25 he was being cheated of the opportunity to do more. He asked that his epitaph be: *Here lies one whose name was writ in water*. This epitaph was engraved on a stone that survives in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, and even though his name does not appear on it, he is widely known.

Another man, once just as obscure, has his name written on hearts and minds everywhere. He is known as a Redeemer. On a more personal level he is known for how he listens to us—how at needful times he invites us to tell our stories and even to ramble. Now that I am a not-so-young pastor, I suspect that is all anyone wants, really. There's no formula to it. It is really just about listening.