

Homily for Monday in the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
September 28, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 21: Job 1:6–22; Psalm 17:1–7; Luke 9:46–50

The 1967 General Convention, the Episcopal Church’s governing body, authorized a “Plan for the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer.”¹ There were 14 drafting committees. One committee was charged with the revision of what it called “Pastoral Offices.” These included Marriage, Reconciliation, Ministration to the Sick, and the Burial of the Dead. It published its work in 1970, *Prayer Book Studies 24*.² This was not the first work on these rites. In 1959, *Prayer Book Studies XIII* described its work on the Burial Office this way, “It attempts to provide appropriately for the departed, the bereaved, and for the total congregation.”³ In 1967, the Standing Liturgical Commission quoted these words as guidance for the new committee’s work.⁴

¹ *Prayer Book Studies 24: Pastoral Offices* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1970), v.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Prayer Book Studies XIII: The Order for the Burial of the Dead; XIV An Office of Institution of Rectors into Parishes* (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1959), 3–4.

⁴ *Prayer Book Studies 24*, 19.

Somewhat surprisingly, the words at the beginning of Prayer Book marriages and funerals still find a home in popular culture. In 1983, in my first assignment after seminary, along with the new 1979 Prayer Book, the 1928 book was still very much in use, especially for weddings and funerals. With the 1979 rites, for the first time since the Reformation, the person who had died was prayed for by his or her name. The new rites provided for a homily in the Burial Office. The rites were organized so that the service seems complete with or without the celebration of Holy Communion. All of that is to the good. But I wished they had left the opening sentences alone.

The three short stanzas of the Prayer Book tradition begin first with words from the raising of Lazarus in John, “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.”⁵ The stanza is from the twenty-fourth chapter of Job. It begins, “I know that my redeemer liveth.”⁶ The third verse was First Timothy’s version of the words of Job, “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither:⁷ the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the

⁵ John 11:25.

⁶ Job 24:25.

⁷ Benjamin Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 119.

name of the LORD.”⁸—in First Timothy, we read, “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.”⁹

There is something entirely straightforward about the gift of life and the reality of death. We Christians try to ground our minds and hearts in the mercies of love and faith.

Massey Shepherd, in his commentary on the 1928 Prayer Book, says the verse from Job that the verses from the twenty-fourth chapter of Job are, “The most beautiful statement in all [of] the Old Testament of unswerving trust and hope in God despite tortuous bodily affliction and decay.”¹⁰

This week we have four lessons from Job. Two weeks ago, we had had lessons from Job at Daily Morning Prayer for four weeks and day, and we did not hear all of the book. Very high on my list of things that I think I want to do when I retire is to be in a Bible study group, something that my present responsibilities don't allow me to do.

⁸ Job 1:20–21.

⁹ 1 Timothy 6:7.

¹⁰ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 324.

Even if I don't say aloud the last words of today's lesson from Job, the words of Job have not ended.¹¹ They are always close to mind and heart when I think about life and death.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹¹ Job 31:40b. "The words of Job are ended."