

The Redeemer

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“For I know that my Redeemer lives— / my Vindicator Who, at the last, at the end, / will stand upon the earth;...” — Job 19:25.

Confession: I am a voracious reader. But you probably at least suspected that. Most of my reading is non-fiction— history, biography— or concentrates on professional areas— theology, Scripture— church connected.

Do I, for pleasure, occasionally delve into fiction? Why, yes I do. And, when I do move over to fiction, I tend to gravitate toward science fiction.

Further I occasionally re-read a book. And so I recently found myself once again devouring the science fiction classic *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

For those unfamiliar with this work, I need to explain it is not just a work of science fiction. It's science fiction and comedy. And it's not just any comedy but specifically British comedy— dry, eccentric comedy. Think *Star Wars* meets *Monty Python* and you've got a good idea of what *The Hitchhiker's Guide* might be like.

Here's one example of its comedic style. *The Hitchhiker's Guide* series— yes, it is a series— is called a trilogy. A trilogy— that's three books. Except there are five books in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* trilogy— five books in this particular trilogy— that's British humor, you see— dry, eccentric.

In the first book of the trilogy the opening scene starts in an very ordinary way. The protagonist, Arthur Dent, has been oblivious to the fact that a superhighway needs to run right through his property. Therefore, his home needs to be demolished.

One morning Arthur crawls out of bed to find his house surrounded by bulldozers. The person in charge claims the demolition plans have been on file and available at the local city hall for months. Arthur says 'but no one told me' and lays down in front of the bulldozers thinking he's not going to let this destruction happen.

Just then the best friend of Arthur, Ford Perfect, snatches him away to a local pub. Despite looking quite human, unbeknownst to Arthur, Ford Perfect— and to reiterate, this Ford Perfect fellow is Arthur's best friend— is from another planet. And Ford Perfect, being from another planet, knows the Earth is about to be destroyed.

Ford Perfect, in fact, knows not just that the Earth will be destroyed. Ford Perfect knows that the Earth will be destroyed in about ten minutes. And Ford Perfect is determined to avoid this, determined to hitchhike into space on a starship and determined to take Arthur with him. And so someone from another planet, has taken Arthur to a local pub so they can become inebriated enough to withstand the stresses involved in hitching a ride on a starship.

Why *is* the Earth being destroyed? Well, of course, the Earth is being destroyed so a superhighway can be built for starships. And that superhighway for starships runs right through the place where our planet is and/or used to be.

Why don't we earthlings know about this? The documents which could have told us about the destruction of the planet are on file and available at a record hall located in another galaxy.

All of which is to say, not too far into the novel the Earth, as we know it, is completely destroyed. It no longer exists. Only Arthur survives. As I indicated, it's a comedic novel— but it's British humor— dry, eccentric— it takes strange, interesting turns. (Slight pause.)

On a serious note, I have mentioned this about my family background before. When I was around four or five, my father had what was in the parlance of the day was called a nervous breakdown. Today we would have describe it as the onset of the mental illness identified as passive dependency or passive aggression.

I was at that point both the oldest of three children and at a tender age. While I won't get too deep into the psychology of this here— to do so would take more time than either I or you have— suffice it to say one interpretation of this event is that, for me at least, the Earth, as I knew it, was completely destroyed. I survived. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Job: “For I know that my Redeemer lives— / my Vindicator Who, at the last, at the end, / will stand upon the earth;...” (Slight pause.)

Christians often refer to Jesus as the Redeemer. I would be the last one to disagree with that.

But equally, coming back to the thought that I am a voracious reader and part of what I read is theology, Scripture— I know that to limit the idea of redeemer exclusively to Christianity may be a fairly common *secular* practice. But to limit the idea of redeemer to an exclusively Christian concept defies the evidence of theology and the evidence found in Scripture. Indeed, as we just heard there is evidence in the work we know as Job. God is called ‘redeemer.’

In fact, in Handel's *Messiah*, if you look carefully at the *Air For Soprano* titled *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, you find the piece strings together both this passage from Job and words from I Corinthians 15. Therefore, the point this music makes is ‘God as Redeemer’ is *not* an exclusively a Christian concept. The Testaments are a continuum. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus *are* connected.

That brings me to the story we heard from Luke. At the resurrection who will be the husband of this woman who has married seven? While the answer of Jesus is couched in the language of resurrection, Jesus is *not* making a point about resurrection.

What is the point Jesus makes? (Quote:) “God is not of the dead but the living. All of them are alive to God.”

Put another way, God lives. That is the belief of Jews. That is the belief of Christians. God lives.

This concept is heard throughout Scripture. This concept is not confined to one segment of the text. The same sentiment— God lives and moves and works among us— this same sentiment is scattered throughout Scripture.

These words, which we also heard today, are found in Psalm 98. (Quote:) “God has made salvation known, / has shown vindication, / divine justice, / to the nations / and has remembered / steadfast love, / truth and faithfulness...”

A God Who is these things, a God Who does these things is a living God. God is then and God is here and God is now and God will be. God lives.

That, in turn, *does* bring us to the Christian belief called the Resurrection. If God lives, if God is here, if God is now, if God will be, if Jesus and God are connected— then Jesus, who we call the Second Person of the

Trinity— lives.

Hence, at its heart and as I say each Easter Sunday, Resurrection is not about resuscitation nor is it about reanimation. Resurrection addresses a basic Jewish belief and a basic Christian belief: God lives. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to both my background and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In *The Hitchhiker's Guide* the Earth is destroyed in a somewhat comedic way. But survive Arthur Dent did.

My own world was destroyed and it affected me in ways which were less than comedic. But survive I did.

To be blunt and again to delve a little into psychology, I think one reason I survived is a parental figure in my life ceased to be present to me. But, paradoxically, that opened my eyes to a singular theological truth: God lives.

I realized my world was shattered but my world was not destroyed. I did survive. I realized I could live life in a new way. For reasons I cannot, myself, explain, I held firm onto the reality, the truth we call the living God. (Slight pause.)

Diana Butler Bass is an Episcopal member of the laity, scholar, church historian and theologian. She recently wrote a short piece she called *Credo, A Litany of Grace*.

To place this writing into context we need to remember the Latin word *Credo* does not mean “I believe.” The Latin word *Credo* means ‘that to which I give my whole heart.’ This is *Credo, A Litany of Grace* by Diana Butler Bass.

(Quote:) “I believe God creates the world and all therein— good, even very good, no matter how far from that goodness human beings wander; I believe Love casts out fear, and that living with compassion is the path to joy; I believe Gratitude threads all of the connections in the web of life;”

“I believe Wisdom dwells among us, embodying both divine insight and human intellect; I believe Hope banishes cynicism, always drawing us toward a creative future;...”

“I believe Awe opens us to an awakened life that reaches out to the world to restore and save; I believe Justice flows all around us, like a healing river; I believe All Shall Be Well.” — the words of Diana Butler Bass. [1] (Slight pause.)

Do terrible things, things we abhor, happen? Whe yes, they do. Worlds are shattered. But God lives.

And my point is not just that God lives. God walks with us at all times and in all ways. God is with us, always. Or as Diana Butler Bass says, “All shall be well.”

You see, when it is said “I know that my Redeemer lives” this needs to be all we hear and all we understand: God lives. It's that simple. And all shall be well, for God is with us. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and

Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “The well known pastor and theologian Brian McLaren said ‘If you summarize all the work of Diana Butler Bass who I quoted earlier into a single thought this would be it: “Nostalgia is a really, really bad idea.”’ Why would nostalgia be a not just a really, really bad idea but a really, really bad theological idea? God lives. That’s about right here and that’s about right now and that’s about what will be. But it is not about yesterday. Let me reiterate this basic theological concept: God lives.”

BENEDICTION: We can find the presence of God in unexpected places. God’s light leads us to places we thought not possible just moments ago. God’s love abounds and will live with us throughout eternity. The grace of God is deeper than our imagination. The strength of Christ is stronger than our needs. The communion of the Holy Spirit is richer than our togetherness. May the one triune God sustain us today and in all our tomorrows. Amen.

[1] Note: very slightly altered for this context.