Job 42:1-6, 10-13  A Happy Ending

Long ago in a faraway land, we might even want to say, “once upon a time,” lived a man named Job; a happy and blessed life he led. Until one day tragedy struck and he lost everything. And then came a second round of suffering, and physical misery, great sores over all his body. And his wife came up to him and said, “Just give up, get it over with, and curse God; then you can die and you won’t suffer anymore.” And then his best friends came, and we think they want to console Job, but instead they rail against him, for days on end it seems, preaching at Job about how he must have done some huge evil, and this is his punishment. And each time they rebuke Job in this manner, he replies, “No, I’m innocent,” and he calls out for God to take away his pain; and complains that he has no recourse, “Oh, that I might know where to find God; I would lay out my case before him.” And then finally, God replies to Job in chapters 38-41. A lovely, poetic response. But we never learn in God’s speech why an innocent man should suffer so much. God never tells us the secret to the question we most want to be answered, why is there evil and suffering and death? Here in this story is Job, whom even God proclaims in chapter 1 is righteous, who suffers more than anyone ever suffered. And also, as we believe, there is Jesus, holy and sinless, God’s own Son, who suffered and died.
And here, in our own experience, are we, certainly not perfect beings, but surely undeserving of the struggles we have sometimes to endure. The idea of it puts us tottering right on the edge of faith, where it would be so easy to fall off to the side into unbelief or despair; it may be a temptation even to deny God, as the struggles and doubt of life overwhelm our childlike belief; or we can struggle and fight to stay on that razor’s edge, where we may get cut up or beat up by the cruelty of the world, or by its unconcern. Sometimes believing is hard. But despite all those hurts, at the edge of faith is where God is. I think that is the point of God’s response to Job. God’s answer may be unsatisfactory- it doesn’t answer all our questions- but Job learns that God is present. Even in the darkness of an anguished mind that has lost its hope and reason for being; even when the body smells and oozes with rotting sores, God is present. And so Job, here in verses 1-6, speaks with utter humility, “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes,” he says. Job has come to understand that he never knew God at all.

It is important for us to see that Job changes. Even though he is innocent of evil deeds and thoughts, he grows; he comes to have a more grateful and more dependent faith in God. I think it is good for us to know that, regardless how
pleasant or how desperate our circumstances, we can change or mature to become more God’s man or woman.

Job says, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” Now my eye sees you. Someone has written that to see God is the greatest blessing. Which may make us think of Moses on Mt. Sinai, who talked with God all that time as he was receiving the Law, but who wanted to see the Lord; and God said to him, “No one can see my face and live; but I will cover your eyes until I am past you, and you may see my back.” Or perhaps we can recall those blind beggars Jesus healed in the gospels, “O Lord, let me see!” And when they were healed, they followed him, or went back to their homes praising God. Even in those ancient days, in that unscientific world, people knew the eye was a special organ. Other parts of our bodies may heal, we may get well over time, but only divine intervention could make blind eyes see again. It is perhaps just as miraculous in this case of Job as with any restoration of sight in the gospel accounts, that he can now see God. He has gone from faulty, partial knowledge of God to the blessed state of seeing God, has come to know better the goodness and greatness of God, and by that, has gained insight into what he is as a human. Seeing God- though we can’t see God entirely, God is so gigantic and pure and bright- we can see how
puny and sinful we are. It is like standing in a brilliant light: we can see every
wrinkle and blemish, all our faults are made so obvious. It can be very frightening;
but everything also becomes very clear.

In his great book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl tells of his
imprisonment in the Nazi death camps during World War II, that the only way he
could survive and continue on from one day to the next was by remembering his
wife, and picturing her in his mind, and then anticipating and hoping for the time to
come when they would be together again. He wrote that we can withstand
suffering by “the contemplation of the beloved.” The contemplation of the
beloved, which keeps bringing me back to verse 5, “now my eye sees you.” And I
think we can understand that in all this that has happened to Job, God has revealed
himself, and that at last, Job is able to “contemplate the beloved,” he can see the
Lord. Job has now a clearer and deeper understanding of God, and also knows that
God is close to him. I believe these verses to mean that God has continually
surrounded him: before his suffering when he was happy, and in the midst of it,
but now, at the end of it, he is able to perceive the reality and the mercy of God in
God’s closeness to him.
Let us take this phrase as a call to communion; as we gather at the Table to contemplate the Beloved Lord: to remember, to look for him now, to hope in him, and to know that he is close at hand.

And so we come to the end of the fable- what one author has called a Hollywood Ending. Job gets everything back, even twice as much as before. We may want to say, “and they all lived happily ever after.” But although the story of Job is written in the style of a fable, it isn’t a fairy tale; these things are not magically made right. Does the biblical writer want to gloss over Job’s suffering; want us to believe that such pain and loss can be justified by a happy ending? Can we really say “all’s well that ends well?” Is it that easy? Some folks will have a lot of trouble with that. Is the happy ending proof of a loving God, when all along Job had been crying out for the loving God, and God seemed silent. All around us are people who may never know a happy ending, who are desperate for the assurance of a loving God, but their suffering may seem to them to be proof rather that there is no God, or perhaps that God just doesn’t care.

I think the passage gives us some help, but only if we read it as grown-ups and not as “happily ever after,” that we shouldn’t understand the happy ending as
God’s present to Job because he’s been good- that we shouldn’t conceive of this ending as a sudden miracle. But just this, that God had been with Job over a long period of time, while he suffered, and then while his body healed; and later as his heart and faith healed, and as he slowly began to rebuild his buildings, and redevelop his property- a long enough time for the generations of livestock to be born; long enough for seven sons and three daughters to be born. Long enough for his profound suffering to find meaning in the reality of God, who was present with him even in his pain; time enough that the suffering could turn from self-centeredness and self-concern for his own struggles to truly seeing God and seeing what he was in relation to God.

And if there is a simple, straightforward message from Job to us, perhaps it is, just keep praying. If we read in those middle chapters of this book, we can find Job saying harsh words to God, almost blasphemies; probably some things we would be afraid to say. But he never stopped talking to God. And if we do that, in whatever situation, we may come to our own happy ending as well, where we will have made a powerful and unbreakable connection with God who, after all, loves us and abides with us as our real and present Lord and Companion.