

“Now My Eye Sees”

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

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Rev. Emily M. Brown

Sometimes, when I’m watching a movie with my children, we get to some perilous moment in the plot, and my kindergarten-age daughter climbs into my lap, or covers her eyes, and expresses her worry. What if something terrible happens? What if the hero dies? What if the bad guy wins? What if the child never finds her parents, or the best friends stay in a fight forever? And I remind her, “this is a movie for children. What happens at the end of a movie for children?” And she sighs heavily and responds, “everything turns out fine and they live happily ever after.”

We are in our fourth and final week of hearing selections from the book of Job, and we come this week to the “happily ever after” of the book. As we noted three weeks ago, the book of Job is made up of two very different kinds of text: a framing narrative that is in kind of a folkloric mode, which begins and ends the book. In between the beginning and the ending, we find lengthy poetic monologues where Job, his friends, and eventually God speak.

This week’s reading, from the final chapter of Job, has one last poetic monologue, and then returns to the folkloric frame to tell us what became of Job. But for people of faith throughout the ages, it has never quite satisfied – in part because the narrator seems so dead set on asserting that everything turned out fine. Anyone who has known grief, most especially the loss of a child, can see the problem: in those first chapters of the book, all ten of Job’s children died in a tragic accident. In the final chapter, we hear that Job had ten new children – seven boys and three girls, the same as the ones who had died – as if children were interchangeable, and the death of one child could be somehow canceled out by the birth of another, especially if the genders are the same.

People of faith have also been troubled by the way that this ending seems to abandon the logic of the rest of the book. All through the book, we have been wrestling with the reality that Job is a righteous man to whom terrible things happened, and more broadly that terrible tragedies befall the undeserving. We have come face-to-face with the hard truth that life is not governed by a

simple logic of cause-and-effect: do good things, and only good will happen to you, do evil and you will swiftly receive your just deserts. The book has dived deep into the mystery of believing in a good God in a world where there is undeserved suffering, and taken us to a place of humbly accepting profound mystery beyond our comprehension. Now, it is almost as if the book backpedals. We are told that *because* Job has been through so much, God restores all that he had lost. It feels like a fairy tale ending, but many people of faith find it profoundly unsatisfying, both because no later good fortune can really undo loss and trauma, and because we know – and the book has already acknowledged – that life is not always fair, the righteous are not always rewarded with earthly blessings, there is great pain and sorrow, and it doesn't always “turn out right” in any way that we can see.

In Job's final poetic speech, he says to God, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” One commentary I read on today's passage spoke about that declaration as a key insight. “What happened to Job and sometimes happens to us,” the UMC Discipleship commentary suggests, “is that our eyes are opened. We see the world as it is, even as we glimpse the kin-dom that is not yet. We see deeper, and those who have suffered, or are suffering, see something others haven't yet seen. And that seeing makes us humble. Or it could make us bitter, withdrawn, angry at a world like this. Humble is so much better. It allows for joy in restoration, even while in tune with the world's pain.”

Job responds to his encounter with suffering, grief, and God, by turning to humility, to wonder, to openness to the mysteries of life. He is transformed by his ordeal.

Biblical scholar Ellen Davis notes the transformation that Job undergoes from the beginning of the book to the end. She notes that in the first chapters of Job, he is profoundly careful, praying even for forgiveness for his children's possible sins. He is someone who lives cautiously and with great anxiety and care. You would expect that such a person, after experiencing profound suffering, tragedy, and loss, might double down on those traits, becoming even more anxious, even more obsessed with doing all in his power to control his fate and that of his loved ones, even more preoccupied with heading off misfortune and locking down his blessings. But we get a hint that something else has happened: in the last chapters of Job, after he has lost everything and then received a new life, new riches, ten more children, we are told that he has named his daughters Jemimah, Keziah, and Keren-happuch – which mean “Dove,” “Cinnamon,” and “Horn

[container] of Eyeshadow.” These are not traditional names in that culture – sometimes there are names which have a meaning that might sound strange to outsiders, but are typical within the culture. This is not the case with these names; Job has given his daughters unusual names, and they are names that evoke whimsy and joy and the delights of life in this world. We’re also told that Job has given these daughters an inheritance alongside their brothers, defying the cultural norms of the time to bestow abundance on all his children.

Commentator Debie Thomas writes: “when we last see Job, he is choosing life. Choosing courage. Choosing to open his heart to love what he cannot control.” She continues, “This is the choice that lies before us, too. When suffering comes, when loss shatters our belief in a predictable world and a “safe” God, what will we do? Will we opt out? Will we close our hearts around our wounds and never risk life again? Or will we participate in the lavish, unbounded love of God, who adores a created cosmos that includes contingency, chaos, destruction, and disorder? We are free to choose — just as God is. We are free to risk our hearts or not — just as God is. Can we love what we do not control?”

That is a powerful question, especially for us in this moment, weary of the pandemic, hoping that we are in its final days but fearing that it might just keep stretching on. Like Job, our eyes have been opened – we have seen how fragile life as we know it is, how tenuous. We have seen how well we can care for each other, and we have felt the betrayal of sometimes seeing that leaders and communities are not always willing to do what it takes to protect the vulnerable. We have experienced great losses – the losses of loved ones (here at the church, we are in the midst of scheduling many of the burials and memorial services that were postponed because families couldn’t travel, and I am struck afresh by all the loss), the loss of a year and a half of “life as we know it,” the loss of routine and normalcy. Our eyes have been opened – we see the world differently now.

So the question Job asks is: how will it change us? Will we enter into humility and wonder, or will we choose bitterness? Will we embrace this beautiful and broken life, or rage at its injustice? Or both? And if new life and new blessings come our way, will we cling to them with fear and worry? Or will we join Job in mischievous delight, knowing that it can all be taken away, but for a moment at least, there is life, and love, and joy?

It reminds me, a bit, of a story we know much better: a story of a Savior who hung on a cross, who rose again with wounded hands and feet, and who, having experienced betrayal and loss, chose life, and wonder, and joy. A savior who appeared to the disciples almost mischievously – cooking over a campfire a meal of grilled fish.

May we resurrection people find that kind of faith – knowing that there is great sorrow in the world, and nevertheless, entering whole-heartedly into all this world has to offer. May we find, within and beyond this pandemic, abundant gifts of whimsy and delight, pleasure and joy. May we accept the blessings of this life with open eyes and open hearts. May we have the strength to love what we cannot control.

Amen.