“Therefore…I repent in dust and ashes.” Today we heard the conclusion of the story of Job. A bit more dramatic was last week’s lesson, an epiphany, when God answered Job’s complaints with a long speech about how God is God and Job is not:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth…where were you when I set the stars in their courses… Have you commanded the morning…and caused the dawn to know its place…Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep…Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this”

As I said, God is God, and Job is not.

The whole story began with God and Satan making a bet. God bragged about Job, a righteous servant, but Satan said that he could make Job curse God, and so horrible things happened to Job. He lost everything and everyone, except for a few “friends” who told Job many times that he must be a sinner for God to punish him in this way.

Job continued to insist that he had done nothing to deserve his fate and, finally, God appears and speaks from a whirlwind.

And so we have the premise of this piece of literature: If God is good, then why do bad things happen to good people?

And the response, grossly simplified: Don’t ask me. For all I know, God and Satan had a wager on me. Really, who knows?

Without a clear answer to the question, it is easy to conclude that if I am suffering, then it is because God is punishing me for “things done and left undone…sins known, and unknown.” I might object that such punishment is too severe, or just keep wondering what was the offense.

A couple of weeks ago I said that this sometimes leaves people angry with God.

This week, I would like to look at a New Testament understanding of this question. Bar-Timaeus in Jericho became blind somehow, and everyone then would have assumed that he, or his father, because he was also named, had sinned. Blindness was punishment.
Bartimaeus cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Why did “many people sternly warn him to be quiet?” Perhaps because God was punishing him, so he shouldn’t seek mercy.

Jesus had a different view, asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” Note that he did not assume that Bartimaeus wanted to regain his sight.

In pastoral practice, you might have heard me ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” but, please don’t expect an instant miracle. Jesus is Jesus, and I am not.

We can be confident that God did not give us grief, illness, or handicaps to punish us for sin. I believe they happen for complex reasons in a complex physical world, and sometimes they are just classified as such by a society that is enamored with “perfection.”

But I cannot truly declare God does not give these things.

I have known people who have suffered or are handicapped but would not want anything to change. They have found positive meaning in their situations. If Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you,” I know one lady who would not say, “Grow my limbs back.” She is more likely to say, “Inspire me more as an artist.”

Does God cause suffering? I cannot truly rule that out, either.

The Prayer Book has a remarkable prayer “For the sanctification of illness.”

Sanctify, O Lord, the sickness of your servant, that the sense of his weakness may add strength to his faith and seriousness to his repentance; and grant that he may live with you in everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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“So sanctify, O Lord, the sickness of your servant,” it says, not, “Take away this sickness.”

Here’s another good one:

O God, the source of all health: So fill my heart with faith in your love, that with calm expectancy I may make room for your power to possess me, and gracefully accept your healing; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And my favorite:
This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly…

At this point in my life, admittedly, I don’t fully understand “the sanctification of illness,” though I certainly have observed it.

I saw a lot of suffering when I was a hospital chaplain, and that big question bothered me: “Why?” I struggled with it, prayed and read about it, discussed it, but didn’t find an answer.

In time, though, I became OK with the question. I still live with the question.

I have faith in our incarnate Lord, who does not make assumptions but instead asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

I even have faith in Job’s God, who didn’t explain Job’s suffering but did give Job an epiphany, the divine presence, with the reminder, “I am God, and you are not.”

One last prayer sums it up for me:

Lord Jesus Christ, by your patience in suffering you hallowed earthly pain and gave us the example of obedience to your Father’s will: Be near me in my time of weakness and pain; sustain me by your grace, that my strength and courage may not fail; heal me according to your will; and help me always to believe that what happens to me here is of little account if you hold me in eternal life, my Lord and my God.

Amen.