

This week the church will celebrate Epiphany. Epiphany is Greek for an appearance or a manifestation. Epiphany is also known as the 12th day of Christmas, and the date when the 3 wise men arrive to visit the young Jesus.

But if you noticed, the text we read this morning had nothing to do with wise men or Jesus. After a brief return to the lectionary for Advent, we jump back today into the Year of the Bible readings. And we're approaching the end of the Book of Job in our readings.

Job is an interesting book, and is unique in the canon of scripture. Scholars aren't sure about when it was written, or about who wrote it, but there are parallel stories in other contemporary Middle Eastern cultures.

Job, rather than a book of history, should be seen as a parable, perhaps. Or an epic poem, in which age old questions are pondered. Job was a good guy—better than you and me. He was without fault before God and he was very blessed. A big family. loving wife. lots of cattle, sheep, goats, camels. You name it—big screen TV's, riding lawn mower, platinum card—he had it all. He was also known for his great faith.

And one day in the heavenly courts, one of the heavenly beings says to God, "I know you like your servant Job, but I think he only likes you because you have blessed him with so much. Why wouldn't he like you? He's got the perfect life."

And so begins the wager.

How will Job respond when his family dies? When his livestock and fields are destroyed? When he loses all that he has?

Job's friends show up and sit with him in silence as he grieves. But then they decide silence isn't enough and start giving helpful advice—"your children must have sinned—that's why they died."

"You must have cheated people. Because we know that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked".

"Just face it, Job. You must have done something for this to happen."

But Job won't accept that. He doesn't know about the divine wager, but he knows that sometimes bad things happen to good people and that it is so not helpful for people to just explain things away.

Job doesn't lose his faith.

But Job does say, "okay, if I have done something to God to deserve this, then God should come down here and tell me what I did."

The book of Job employs courtroom language. Job wants to face his accuser. He wants his friends to stop it with their hearsay evidence and he wants God to answer.

And so we get our epiphany, our divine appearance.

It isn't a star in the heavens to guide the wisemen, in this instance. But God answers Job out of the whirlwind. The text you heard this morning is actually God's second speech to Job. The first can be found in chapter 38 and 39 and it is a beautiful piece of literature that I invite you to look at it this week. In the first speech, God takes Job on a tour of the cosmos and through all of creation, and then asks him, "now how many horses have you invented, Job? Where were you when I set the earth on its course in the heavens? How well can you explain to me why penguins can't fly?"

And Job withdraws his lawsuit. In the face of creation and his very small role in it, Job is humbled, tells God that he's sorry, and then repents in dust and ashes.

Job asked for an epiphany, and he got one. But not, presumably, one he would have scripted for himself.

His grand tour of creation included two mythical creatures. Behemoth and Leviathan are creatures of chaos, completely outside the control of humanity. You might be able to put a harness on an ox to plow your fields, or make pets out of dogs and cats, but Behemoth and Leviathan cannot be domesticated. But God considers them to be a beautiful part of God's creation. Listen to how God describes Behemoth—"It is the first of the great acts of God".

This seems to be in opposition to the account of creation in Genesis—where humanity is put in charge of stewardship over creation. In Job, humanity is no more important than the onager, the duck, or Behemoth. In contrast to Genesis, Behemoth is the first great act of God, not Adam, not humanity.

It seems as if this epiphany is God's way of saying, "yes, human creatures, I made you too. And I love you. But I don't *only* love you. And perhaps you shouldn't think so highly of yourselves".

Maybe this call to humility is a good way to begin our New Year. As we make resolutions about how we are going to interact with each other, how we're going to treat the planet entrusted to our care, and how we're going to live in this new year, perhaps an epiphany of humility could be helpful.

People have long turned to Job to ponder the question of why bad things happen to good people.

The question of where is God in tragedy is one with which we still struggle. Yet I find comfort in the idea that people were wrestling with the same issue thousands of years ago when Job was being written. It suggests that the reason we don't have an answer to that question—not because we haven't put our smartest minds to the problem—but because, perhaps, the mystery of God is not something we understand this side of eternity.

But some things are clear.

God doesn't mind faithful people calling for answers. God doesn't promise we'll like the answers, or even understand the answers, but God doesn't critique Job for wanting to understand. It is always okay to cry out to God for an epiphany.

God does not, however, like it when people like Job's friends try to explain away the mystery of God. Their pat answers, presuming they know the mind of God, are what cause God to take offense. God tells Job's friends, "my wrath is kindled against you for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

And then the story of Job ends. We are told that God restored his fortunes. He ends up with twice as much as he had originally, including 10 new children. Listen to the last verses of Job's story:

"The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

He also had seven sons and three daughters.

He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Kerenhappuch.

In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations.

And Job died, old and full of days." (Job 42:12-17)

I can't imagine what it took for Job to raise this "replacement" family. After the loss he'd already faced, it must have been a huge act of courage to give his heart to these new children. But Job's tour of creation has changed him as a parent. Now that he's approaching his life with some post epiphany humility, he seems to value all of his children—even Job's famous daughters. The text tells us that even his daughters receive an inheritance from their father. Nobody in the ancient world was doing that.

The story of Job ends on a positive note, but it still leaves me feeling uneasy. 42 chapters and a few thousand years later and we're still wanting answers. Yes, God, we'll try to be more humble in the face of the wonder of your creation, but we still are left with the same questions. Why do bad things happen to good people? Worse yet, why do good things happen to bad people? We are still left crying out for an epiphany.

In a few moments, we'll gather around this table to share communion. And as we remember Jesus, the son of God, through the meal he shared with his disciples, we have the opportunity for yet another epiphany. Again, not the star in the east, but an appearance, revealing, or manifestation of God, nonetheless. Perhaps as God heard our questions, our lament, our frustration with the ways of this world, God realized his answer to Job was only good to a point. The world needed a different kind of epiphany. We needed to see God in new ways. And so God became flesh and dwelt among us. God in Jesus suffered the way we suffer. God in Jesus celebrated the way we celebrate. God in Jesus held friends as they cry, just as we do.

It may not answer the questions about why bad things happen to good people, but it does answer the question to where God is in the midst of it. God is right there with us, in the midst of it, experiencing it as we do. I'd like to wish for you that 2010 will be nothing but happiness and roses. But I can't do that. Because I know that there will be difficult times too. What I can wish for you in 2010 is that through it all, the good and the bad, you will feel God's presence with you in the midst of it. May it be so. Amen.