One of the privileges of being a priest is that I get to visit people in the hospital in their times of need. Over time I’ve accumulated a handful of Scripture passages and prayers that I like to have with me whenever I make these visits. Psalm 23 is a favorite. And there are others, like comforting passages from 1 Corinthians that are often appreciated. Something that’s not on my short list of “good Scripture for hard times” is our reading from Job today.

Job’s story is ubiquitous in our culture, And we’ve been reading through it for the past few weeks. But for those of us who need a refresher, The short version of the story is that Job had one terrifically bad day, Where he lost his livestock, servants, and ten of his children in various disastrous situations. The majority of the book is Job and his friends struggling to make sense of the incredible loss. Last week at church we heard the part of the book where Job is struggling to find God in all of it. Then today in our lessons, we get God’s answer – of sorts - for everything that’s gone on. God begins the conversation with Job by saying, “Gird up your loins, like a man.” Which basically translates to, “I’m about to tell you something harsh, And I want you to take it like a man.” Then God continues with a barrage of questions like: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” Most of the conversation feels uncomfortably like cosmic sarcasm: “Tell me, c’mon, surely you know!”

The selection we have for today only covers a small portion of God’s response to Job. But it goes on and on, with something like 70 more verses of similar questions. Job has a moment to answer and say, “Oh geez, sorry God, I didn’t realize…” Before God launches in to another 50 or verses of more of the same.

Forgive me for my lowering God down to human standards, But if God were taking a “Pastoral Care” class, I think God would get a pretty bad grade for this interaction. I’m pretty sure I was taught to never begin a conversation with someone in need by saying, “Gird up your loins…” And we’re not supposed to answer people in pain by saying, “Hold on a minute buddy, Let’s talk about how tiny and insignificant you are in the scheme of things…
Let me tell you what I’ve seen and done…”

I can hardly imagine what it must’ve been like to be Job in this moment. Terrified at hearing God speak to him directly. Humiliated by what was said. Overwhelmed with the new information God was giving him.

I sympathize with Job here. He just wanted to know if God was noticing him. If God was present in the incredibly difficult time he’d been having. Job just wanted to know where he stood: Do I matter to you, God? Do I rise to the importance of getting your attention?

And it’s not just Job who wants this kind of affirmation. Look at our Gospel for today. The story of two brothers, James and John, who’d followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. They’re also desperately seeking some kind of promise from God that they’ll be okay. “Jesus, let us sit at your right and your left in your glory,” they say. Basically, they’re saying “Let us join you in guiding whatever’s coming next.” We could criticize the brothers for having too much ambition, or being selfish or power hungry. But honestly, I think James and John just wanted to make sure they were secure. They wanted to know that their relationship with Jesus was going to last, and that they were going to be okay.

This is a need most of us have as humans. We like to know where things stand. We like to define our relationships: “Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?” We want to make sure we’re getting along with the people we work with: “Are we doing okay?” We’re obsessed with tracking who’s up and who’s down. That’s why we have pollsters who call and ask us questions about what we think about issues, or who we’re going to vote for. We even structure our leisure activities around keeping track of such things: Like in sports: Keeping score, knowing who’s in what place. Tracking wins and losses and stats.

We’re no different from Job, or James, or John. We want an assurance from each other and God that we’re okay, that our relationships are solid, and that we’ll be secure, and hopefully even comfortable.

Today we get some of God’s answers to this age-old human need. In the Gospel, Jesus doesn’t really play the game with James and John. It’s almost like he says, “I’m not going to figure out who’s going to sit where. I’m not in the business of seating charts, God the Father will sort that out later.” Jesus moves past our need to keep score, And he says: “It doesn’t matter where you sit.
What matters is that you’re in this with me,
Baptized with me,
Drinking the cup with me,
Serving with me.”

And in the case of the Old Testament,
God’s answer to Job is that he’s part of a much, much larger creation than he ever imagined.
Yes, his suffering is real,
But so is his membership within God’s ever-unfolding universe.

In the end, the gift of these stories is that they offer us a dose of perspective.
Whether we’re in a period of stability or strength,
Most of the time we struggle to see past our own needs and goals and struggles.
We often think we’re the main characters in every story.
But today we’re reminded that we’re part of a world that’s so much bigger than us.
We’re siblings with the rest of God’s creations.
God’s work is so much bigger than our experiences, our polls, our elections, or our desire to secure our place in the hierarchy of things.
That’s the good news for today: That we are small.
And God is much bigger than us.

This good news seeped into my bones the past couple days as I headed out to Bellwether Farm, our new diocesan camp and conference center.
About 20 of our St. Paul’s parishioners were gathered there on Friday and Saturday for a women’s retreat.
It was a wonderful thing to go out to the country and be on wide open land.
I was aware of how our individual fears, stories, and hopes, were being held not only by the community of women, but also by those fields, and the lake down the hill, and the leaves on the trees that were just beginning to change color.
Things started to fall into perspective out there on the farm.

Then before lunch yesterday, one of our parishioners was spontaneously asked to lead the grace.
She pulled out her phone, and quickly looked up a poem.
It’s one many of you may know, called Wild Geese, by Mary Oliver.
And as our parishioner read the poem I thought,
“Oh my gosh,” I think this is what God was saying to Job out of the whirlwind.
Not condemning him for his stupidity or misunderstanding,
But saying, “Whoa whoa, you are only one small part in my beloved creation.
You’re only piece in the great unfolding of my work.”

So I leave you with these words of Mary Oliver today.
Placing them before you as a reminder of who you are,
And where you stand in God’s great, big world we share:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
AMEN.