Some of you may know the story of Job. Some may feel you have been living it! Here is the three minute version of the story which will bring us up to reading for today:

Job was blameless and upright, a faithful man who provided well for his family, who sacrifically and generously brought his offerings and gifts to the altar, seeking God's forgiveness for his sins and the sins of his family. Job loved his children so much that he made additional offerings to God just in case they, his children now grown, had sinned unknowingly. God lifted up Job as an example; in God's words "a man who was blameless and upright."

As our story begins, Satan, the Accuser, has just returned from going around checking on humankind. God asked him how his servant Job was doing. The Accuser replied that Job was too good to be true and accused God of spoiling Job with too many blessings; that without all of that prosperity Job would surely someday curse God to God's face! The Accuser proposed a wager claiming that he could make Job denounce his faith in God. Knowing Job as only God could, God took the bet with the caveat that the Accuser could do anything he wanted to Job except take his life.

The Accuser went about doing his work and got others to do his horrible deeds, visiting all kinds of destruction on Job. Before he was done, Job's seven sons and three daughters and their families had been utterly destroyed, along with all the animals and all but three of the servants; the only one left in the family was his wife. In response to these tragedies, Job tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell down on the ground to worship acknowledging that he was born with nothing and it is only to be expected that he will die with nothing, "God gives and God takes away." Hearing that faithful response, the Accuser still was not yet ready to give up; so he said to God, "Skin for skin! Take away his health and he will curse you to your face!" So, Job's skin became covered in sores and boils. He could not have returned home if he had wanted to. Job covered himself with ashes and went to sit in the ash heap to grieve. There was no consoling Job, how could the re be? To lose anyone in our lives is horrible, to lose everything and everyone? It seems he even lost his wife, since her response to all of this was, "Do you still insist on your integrity? Curse God, and die." To which Job answers, "You are a foolish woman, should we receive the good from God and not the bad also?"

Three of Job's friends came and sat with him, they sat in silence for seven days for his suffering was great. Sometimes that is the only thing we can do, to just be silently present. It is Job who breaks the silence as he lifts up his voice and begins to lament the day of his birth; wondering about the purpose of life itself. It is then the first of the three friends speaks, eventually all three have their say, and basically what they tell Job is to 'fess up, "you must have sinned somewhere along the way and God is punishing you, own up to it and seek God's forgiveness." Job says, "No way. I have always made atonement and this cannot be punishment, even if it were it is far too great." Job insists after much argument with his friends and no relief in sight that God is the one who made him and Almighty God has to act with justice. Job begins to imagine what it would be like to call God out, to come and make the case against Job, or
answer for the injustice. This becomes Job's impassioned plea, to see God face to face and be granted the wherewithal to be able to stand and speak, to demand that justice be done.

Some 34 chapters later God does come and that's where our scriptures start for today, “The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” Answered might be too generous a word, questioned is more like it; God questioned Job above the roar and power of the storm. “Who is this...? Where were you...? When did you...? Have you...? Can you...?” Job is literally dumbfounded, finally lays his hand on his mouth and says, “I am of small account, what shall I answer?” In this response Job seems to acquiesce under God’s power, to give up the argument, so why isn’t that the end of the story? From our human perspective God won, but God won’t let Job go. We may think of God as king, but God does not want submissive, cowering loyal subjects, servants or slaves. No, God wants a relationship with us that requires a give and take, a choice, an understanding. We have to believe and truly know that what we teach our youngest children to pray is true. “God is great and God is good.” So God speaks again in questions and refers to setting the boundaries of all the wild animals, the wilderness and that even the great sea monsters of old, Behemoth, Leviathan, the rulers of Chaos are under God’s controlling hand.

What Job discovers this time is that ‘it’ is not all about him; that he is part of something much larger than himself. Job had been demanding justice and due to his innocence, his lack of sin, wanted God to answer for what had happened to him; like most of us he wanted answers and someone or something to blame. When Job speaks it seems he has given up his argument, but has not just given up in despair like last time. This time Job realizes that he has been changed; his whole world view is different. Although he has acknowledged all along that God gives and takes away, God sends the good and the bad alike, Job had not understood all that God has done and is doing. Job’s view had been, “I am being unjustly afflicted, if God is punishing me, then God should be held accountable and come and rectify the situation. If God is not punishing me, then where is God in my pain and suffering? Why has God not come to my aid since I have always done what is right and faithful? Job’s questions are our questions too, but what about his answer? He says, “God, I did not understand; things too wonderful for me, I did not know. I had heard of you with my ears, but now my eyes see you.” What Job asked for over and over again was to see God face to face.

Well, his prayer was answered and although at first overwhelmed, Job found himself in the presence of the Almighty and that presence was enough. Nothing else mattered. He realized that all of his life he had gone through the motions, made his sacrifices for sin, gave his offerings – you know: went to church, paid his pledge, served as a deacon, taught Sunday School – all good things, but somehow in all of the doing he never knew God, never saw God; never understood that what appears like chaos around us, that which is wreaking havoc upon us, is part and parcel of the whole of creation. We are all part of the ‘whirlwind’ out of which God speaks and calls us his own. God is able to make sense where there is no sense; God is able to make a way out of 'no way;' to make order out of chaos, as God did at the very beginning of the world. It is not by accident that we call all this the ‘created order!’ To paraphrase Job’s final words, “Oh God, I had no idea, all I knew was that my world was spinning out of control, falling apart. I didn't understand, until now, that you have been here all along, keeping my very life.”

The book of Job has a happy ending. God asks Job to pray for his friends who had been all wrong about God and once that was done, Job’s fortunes were restored – a new set of sons and
daughters, double the number of animals and servants are given. There are hints in this happy ending that Job's way of life has changed – he is celebrating with his whole family, where earlier the children partied without him. His beautiful daughters are named for us, making them precious in his sight, and they are included in the receiving of an inheritance. For that matter, all ten of the children receive the inheritance, not just the first born son as was the custom. Job is grateful for each and every one of his children. Job seems to have built a relationship with his family, one of joy and care-giving rather than worry and sacrificial protection. He has set aside his uptight ways in order to enjoy the presence of his children, grandchildren and great, greats; for Job knows without a shadow of a doubt that he is living in the presence and grace of God. Job never understood and appreciated the blessings around him, until they were gone. Job did not understand, even with all his sacrificing and offerings to God, that the best gifts we bring to the altar are those of thanksgiving and joy and faith in a loving and present God. Our gifts and offerings cannot buy God off, they are not “fire insurance” as the old preacher's joke goes, but rather a physical, material, practical and loving response to God's act of assurance, assurance of our standing in the blessing and love of a merciful, forgiving, and powerfully present God who keeps our lives, forevermore. Amen.