Today’s lesson from Job, if nothing else, shows us that sarcasm like the Eucharist and baptism is divinely ordained. I know it has been a few minutes since we read the actual passage so let me give a little background. The Book of Job tells the story of a guy named Job so there is truth in advertising. At the beginning of the story Job is a rich, prosperous and devout man. According to the inventory given at the start of the book he had seven sons, three daughters, as well as seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels and various other livestock. One day when Job and his family were “before the Lord,” Satan showed up and began debating God about the depth of Job’s devotion. Satan makes the argument that Job is only devout because God has put a figurative hedge around him, not allowing anything bad to befall him. He continues by saying that if God were to remove this protection and let calamities come upon Job then he would curse God to his face. God disagrees but allows Satan to put his theory to the test. So much of the rest of the story is about the calamities that begin to happen to Job, the reactions of Job’s friends and the reactions of Job himself. Job loses his wealth, his livelihood, his sons and daughters and for good measure he is covered with sores. Based on this evidence his friends continually insist to Job that he must have done something wrong and hector him to repent for whatever nasty thing that he did. While Job for the most part says that he has not done anything wrong and continues to believe in God’s goodness and sovereignty.

What we have today is a speech from God and it comes after one of Job’s friends has tried to explain to Job what is going on. It is filled with contrasts between what God knows and can do with what we know. And the way much of this is accomplished is through sarcasm. God begins the speech by telling Job to gird up his loins like a man. This doesn’t have much to do with my sermon, I just like saying “gird up your loins like a man.” Anyway, after this God says things like, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” The discussion takes on a bit of the characteristic of a precocious ten-year-old being put in their place by an exasperated adult. God is laying out the difference between Himself and humanity.

There is an old German expression which says, “Mann denkt, Gott lenkt.” Which for you non-Lutherans out there means roughly “Man thinks, God governs” although it sometimes gets translated more rhymingly as “man proposes and God disposes.” But whatever the translation the sentiment being pointed out is that we humans think a lot of things and often confuse our thoughts or opinions with actual ability

Part of the issue and what God is adroitly pointing out today has to do with a matter of scale. If you remember back to the Book of Genesis and the story of creation, we were told that God created humanity in his own image. The key word there is image meaning that we are not actually God but rather a shadow of God. The original intention, before the fall, was that humanity would look after the world in the same way God looked over the entirety of creation. Of course. we messed this up in the first few paragraphs but notice that even when things were going according to God’s plan, we had a very small scope of responsibilities – we took care of the plants and birds. After the Fall and the ensuing chaos that entered the world. it is debatable how much of our original job description remained but one thing is certain: it did not expand. God did not say you have done such a bad job of looking after what I gave you why don’t you take a crack at running the cosmos. This is not to say that God took all responsibility from us or that we have no role to play but simply to say our role is limited and we should work on bettering the things that we can control.

In the story of Job today the premise was that Satan believed the only reason for Job’s piety was the blessed life he had. So, God allowed for Satan to remove the manifestations of that blessedness. That was the part Job could not control. The one piece that he could control was whether or not he would maintain his piety or if he would curse God to his face as Satan predicted. Controlling and continuing his piety may not sound as exciting as speculating on the nature of the created order but, as I said, it was the one piece that was completely in Job’s control. And I think Job’s temptation is the same temptation we have. Often the things we can control are not glamorous, which is further compounded by the fact that these non-glamorous things are often hard. Things like keeping our peace or loving our neighbor are not easy and doing them in the way we are asked may even go unnoticed. And so the temptation is to ignore what we can do and instead expand into areas where we have less control but more opportunities for judgement. That is why politics is so popular it has all of the judgement and none of the responsibility. But this is why God reminds us today of scale and the things for which we are responsible and capable of influencing. Many times, we may find ourselves in a position like Job does today where all that we can really control is ourselves. And when that is the case, we can decide if we will act in ways that are glorifying to God or ways that are glorifying to Satan. That was really the locus of the bet today; who would be glorified. When all was taken away would Job resemble the God who created him or the forces of evil that rebel against God. If Job chose to curse God, he would have repeated the original sin, the sin that said we know better. He would have taken on the pretense of knowledge and told God all the ways that he was wrong. But there was another way, the way that Job, despite a little grumbling, did choose. He chose to say that he did not understand what was going on but that he still knew that God was good and worthy of worship.

The theological concept that gets addressed here is known as theodicy which basically asks the question how does a good God allow evil in the world. Or if you would prefer it in pop culture terms it asks why do bad things happen to good people. And in answering this question we have some explanations and theories which may or may not be intellectually satisfying but the real question is the one put forward in Job today is how do we remain faithful no matter what comes? When things do not go our way do we keep our faith or do we look at whatever calamity as a breach of contract where we are allowed to do whatever we want because we have convinced ourselves that God has not lived up to his end of the bargain? Any honest assessment of this question needs to take into account what God tells us today which is how little we know and understand. And so, we need to ask how can we glorify God with the little we have? Satan was fully aware of the power that Job had in his ability to choose how to react once everything was taken away. Otherwise, he would not have put so much effort into trying to get Job to curse God. Sometimes we forget that much of our life in God is manifest in small decisions but it is in these small decisions where we become God’s own this day and forevermore.