

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Welcome to All Saints' Sunday, a time when we get to honor the love in our hearts for those who live in the joy of God's eternal life. When a loved one dies, we enter into a new relationship with God, and with life. We have to trust more in God for them, and for us. We have to, because we begin to recognize more clearly that the story of our lives is not really just our story. The story of our lives is just a thread in the greater fabric of God's story, woven into it in ways that change the whole meaning of what it means to have a story.

I know that I talk a lot about this thing called "God's story." I do it for a lot of reasons, but one important reason is that in today's world, it is so easy to lose track of who we are in the middle of so many different stories. It isn't just that we have an infinite choice of stories on the Internet, on television, in movies, and any number of other places where stories are told these days. It isn't just that those stories tend to drive us into smaller and smaller corners of what life has to offer us, like someone painting themselves into a corner of a room. The real problem, I feel at times, is that we are losing a sense of responsibility for choosing our story, and claiming its value in ways that make our lives as valuable as God has meant them to be.

This can sound like so much noise until we see people whose lives have been lost in destructive stories. The gunman who killed eleven innocent people at a Pittsburgh synagogue acted in part because he had lost track of reality in online chat rooms, unable to see what the real value of life was, anymore. Like-minded people reinforced and exploited his delusions, stories based on fiction disguised as fact confused him, until he lost hope of his life having any meaning, except as a murderer of innocent people. What stories we listen to, and make the guide for our choices in our own stories, matters deeply.

Fortunately, very few people lose track of their lives to the point where they murder people. But we don't have to go that far to seriously lose track of who we are in God's story. I worry about parents these days, who feel so much pressure to protect and nurture their children towards the story of what they consider a successful life, a story that often holds them captive to empty values and empty emotions. And then there are young parents who have almost no idea what the story of life is all about, lost in the now, and having very little sense of what their children might need to grow into healthy adults. You don't have to be a gunman to be lost in your own story.

This week we come to the end of the Bible story of our friend Job, a good person who had everything bad happen to him. Job thought that his story was perfect. His wealth, his family, his health, his future - all of the checkboxes were marked off. Job was, you might say, the person whose outsides might make us jealous in our insides. And then, all at once, everything in Job's story fell apart. His friends pitied him, and offered excuses for how, somehow, Job had done something wrong to offend God. In other words, Job's friends were more interested in defending their own stories about who God was than helping Job, and didn't want to question their own stories.

To question our own stories is a hard thing to do. You may have noticed a

quote come up sometimes in our gathering thoughts from a poet named Kenneth Patchen. [PATCHEN] Patchen was the son of a steelworker in Youngstown, Ohio, a town not so different from Meriden in years past. He was a good writer, and so, in the middle of the Great Depression, he was fortunate to win a scholarship to a college in Minnesota, where he learned how to write great poetry. He was a strong and handsome guy, his writing career was taking off, he married a beautiful woman - and then, the story of his life changed. While playing touch football with some friends, he hurt his back badly, and spent most of the rest of his life in bed.

A friend bought him a water paint set to cheer him up, and Patchen began to paint things. [PAINTED BOOK] He painted the covers of his books, to make some badly needed extra money. [PICTURE] And then, he did something unique - he made paintings that were actually poems. One of his picture poems reminds me of how God can shape the story of our lives: "The one who comes to question himself has cared for mankind."

[PATCHEN2] Kenneth Patchen found humility the hard way, but he found it. Patchen had to question his own life story more deeply and appreciate God's story more deeply, and the profound emptiness of so many stories that the world tries to sell us. Like Job, Patchen had lost so much. And, like Job, he had to surrender to what God could do with his story, and embrace God's story more humbly. His back never healed completely, but he created miracles of love from his pen and paintbrush. [BLANK]

In Job's story this week, Job reflected humbly on the greatness of God's story, and repented at his foolish pride wanting to justify his story before God. We try to make Hollywood endings to our own stories, but we forget that God, the creator of all things, the redeemer of all of creation, the transformer of all people and things through the power of God's love, this God of ours invented the Hollywood ending of all stories. There is no story of human life that is better than the story of God. God's story is the story of redemption, from its very beginning to its very end. Everyone in God's story has the chance to be written into the final, "And they lived happily ever after" ending of God's story of redemption. The only question, is, are we willing to question our own story, accept that we need to be a part of God's redeeming story, and claim our role in it?

For his part, Job said, "Yes, I am sorry, God, the story of my life has no value apart from your story. I give you what I have to you, for your story. Do with me what you will." God accepted Job's repentance, and gave Job a small but important task, to set him on the right path in the story of God's redemption. God asked Job to pray for his friends, who had worked so hard to deny God's love for Job, and to deceive Job into thinking that God didn't want Job to be in God's story. God wanted Job to question himself humbly, and to care for humankind humbly, to become more like the person who God had wanted Job to be in God's story. Job was a good man. Job was a caring man. And, now, Job would be a man who would never again need the world's story to feel true joy in his life. Job was free, free to love as God loves, to give as God gives. And so, we should not be surprised that there is a joyful ending to Job's story. His joy in living God's

story led him to wholeness again. He had even more children, even more wealth, and lived a long, long life. It is a Hollywood ending to Job's story, but of course, it wasn't Hollywood who wrote the ending. It was God. Because God's love will always win. With God's love as the heart of Job's story, with Job knowing how wonderful and powerful God love really was, even for a humble person like himself, there couldn't possibly be any other ending to Job's story.

In our own lives, we might be waiting for that Hollywood ending to our story. We might be fighting for it, day by day, or cursing God, or other people, because we don't have any hope for that Hollywood ending. We might reflect on our loved ones on this All Saints' Sunday, and wonder if their stories had missed that Hollywood ending.

For those of us struggling, God asks us to stop fighting for our endings, and to seek out God's story of love and redemption that is alive, right now, waiting for us to stop deceiving ourselves with our own version of what life is meant to be. God hopes that we don't have to wait for what Job suffered to accept God's story, but God will be there for us, and with us, if our life takes a hard turn, to invite us back into the story of God's love. Like Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, ready to raise him from the dead, God weeps for us, and with us, ready to bring us back to life, and to remember that God's story of love will always win.

The end of God's story has been written from the beginning of creation. We live, because God love always wins. We are offered eternal life, because God's love always offers us victory. God will never settle for any other ending to God's story. We always have a chance to choose it, to be thankful for it, and to love others in it, as we allow ourselves to be woven into God's story, and to start living his answers to our prayers, written in love. May we be the ones who come to question ourselves in the light of God's love, and to care for humankind joyfully, as God has always done, in perfect love. Amen.