

Sermon on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, Luke 17:5-10
17th Sunday after Pentecost, October 6, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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Once again, the words of an Old Testament prophet put into words much of what we are feeling today in America. As we observe continued corruption by wealthy corporations and politicians, racial injustice that is ingrained in our economic and political systems, and the lack of any cure from our political leaders, Habakkuk nails it with his words today:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Can you relate to this prophet’s complaint? It sounds like Habakkuk has been listening to a cable news network or reading the daily newspaper these past few years, or lives in a neighborhood where crime and violence keep people in constant fear. Many of us are getting very weary of the constant partisan conflict, not only between political rivals but among their defenders and critics, some of whom are even our friends or relatives! Most of us are tired of living in constant tension, so people begin to tune out, or get impatient for answers and solutions.

For this prophet, though, this is not so much a complaint against a corrupt political and economic system or government, as it is a protest against God himself. Sure, the system is corrupt and nobody is doing anything about injustice, but the prophet, as a person of faith, believes it is God’s job to come to the rescue of human beings who are suffering.

It’s an age-old human question. Where is God? Is God even listening? Our faiths teach us that God is always there, watching and listening, always ready to protect, to show mercy and compassion for those who are suffering. So come and stop the madness, already, the people cry. It’s even worse for the prophet, whose view of the world and of God demands that God participate in what happens in this world. It’s totally opposite to the classical Greek thought (in the days of the Hebrew prophets) who accepted the divine will without question – who saw whatever happened as “fate”, and thus inevitable and unchangeable. The prophet cannot and will not seek to comprehend the world apart from a God who is personal and approachable, who looks down on the creatures God has made with mercy and compassion, as well as judgment. And so the prophet’s role is not only to proclaim God’s Word of judgment and mercy as a messenger, but also to

question and argue with God about God's decisions and actions. Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel famously said, "The Jew may love God, or he or she may fight with God, but she or he may not ignore God!" So Habakkuk argued with God in protest of the human situation of injustice, corruption and violence which he saw around him, and demanded God's answer, to act and bring an end to it.

This is an audacious role for prophets, who are human, not divine, but it is also a task to which all persons of faith are invited! We see this often done by human characters in the Bible – arguing or bargaining with God, like Abraham and Moses did – or even the Virgin Mary when she was told by an angel that she would be the mother of God's Son, the Savior of the World!

So Habakkuk said that he would watch and wait for God to answer:
I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, And what he will answer concerning my complaint.

But Habakkuk received an answer he didn't expect.
*Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets that a runner may read it. [Like a marathon runner along Summit Avenue can read the message as she runs?] For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, it does not lie. If it seems to tarry wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, **But the righteous live by their faith!***

Wait, what? That is God's answer? Watch, and wait? Be patient? Share the message with others that God's vision of this world is still good, that you and I need to just watch and wait for it to come to fruition? To reassure one another that the Lord is coming, that justice and mercy will win in the end is good, but it doesn't satisfy us right now! We want answers! We want results, because the proud and the evildoers seem to be winning, and their spirit is not right in them. But there must be something more to "the righteous shall live by their faith" – something deeper which can help us in our despair and our impatience for justice!

The prophet's counsel to be patient and live by faith, even as we wait for the Lord who doesn't seem to answer, is essential, especially in the worst of times. In the 20th century, during the Holocaust as millions of European Jews were slaughtered by Nazi soldiers and their allies, many asked where was God as innocent children were slaughtered. Their brutal situation was a direct challenge to faith with the power of evil cruelty. But still, many Jews answered with faith, singing a song based on Habakkuk's words: *Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.* When all hope seems gone, live by faith and love.

The Psalmist continues the message to have faith, and put trust in God, especially in those things over which we do not have control. For faith is a way of life, choosing to live by a set of values unfathomable by those without faith:

*Do not be provoked by evildoers; do not be jealous of those who do wrong.
For they shall soon wither like the grass, and like the green grass fade away.
Put your trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and find safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord, who shall give you your heart's desire.
Commit your way to the Lord; put your trust in the Lord, and see what God will do
The Lord will make your vindication as clear as the light, and the justice of your
case like the noonday sun. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently. Do not be
provoked by the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes. Refrain
from anger, leave rage alone; do not be provoked; it leads only to evil. For evil
doers shall be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord shall possess the land.*

This is good advice, especially for us today in these contentious times, when people argue over basic principles without compromise, and fight over social media networks, losing friends and burning bridges. In these contentious days, the most important mission of the church today may be as witnesses to patient faith.

In the gospel, when Jesus warned the disciples about the occasions for stumbling and falling short that were certain to come for them as they followed the path of faith, and were faced with the necessity of forgiving even other disciples as they sinned against one another, they said to Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith!” For who has “enough faith” to follow Jesus, But how much faith is “enough”, when you can't quantify faith?

I have an instrument called a “Fitbit”, which I wear on my wrist like a wristwatch. It monitors a lot of things, like my heart rate, how many steps I have taken, my pulse, it can even tell you how many hours of sleep you get at night! But there is no “Faithbit” to monitor faith! No instrument can count how many times I believed Jesus when I was tempted not to, how many times I acted faithfully when I could disobey God's commands, when I acted with love instead of with anger, jealousy or greed. Faith, it seems, cannot be quantified!

But thankfully, we don't need much faith to be faithful! Jesus said, *“If you had the faith of the tiniest mustard seed, you could uproot a mulberry tree and throw it into the sea! With just a tiny bit of faith, you can move mountains!”* This doesn't mean, my friends, that if you can't move mountains you don't have enough faith! This is “hyperbole”. Jesus means that with the tiniest speck of faith, you can do wondrous things that you never imagined or thought possible! God will amaze you with what you and I are able to do with faith, even when you don't think you have enough! You don't have to be a “faith superhero” like Moses or Peter to amazing things as a witness to God! Even Moses and Peter fell short – quite often, actually – and even betrayed God, as Peter denied Jesus three times before Jesus was crucified, but look what Peter accomplished through faith! He became the rock of Christ's church!

So what is faith? In the book of Hebrews, we read that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” It is that assurance that even when life seems bleak, we continue to hope and wait for God’s redemption, and wait, hope, and WORK for it even when there is no proof that good will come. We are used to waiting; it’s a common fact of life! We wait for the results of a test to come, we wait for the safe arrival of a loved one on their way home, we wait at the bedside of a parent or grandparent in hospice when their life is ending, we wait for justice to come when generations show the reality of injustice. Sometimes our faith and our waiting are not rewarded; we may be let down. Yet still we hope, and we wait, and we work with love for others for God’s kingdom to come.

Yet, I don’t know anyone who feels they have “enough faith”, but Jesus reassures you and me today that even the tiniest bit of faith, like the tiniest mustard seed, is enough to serve as a great witness to God! With a little bit of faith, you and I can wake up in the morning, come out of hiding, and boldly resist injustice, whether it is by a public profession of faith in God’s goodness, or quietly showing love for your neighbor behind the scenes, by befriending a neighbor in need.

So, where does faith come from, faith that will give us hope in God, patience in waiting, and the power to love others beyond human experience. In our second lesson, Paul praised Timothy for his faith, and reminds him of the faith of his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois, who passed on their faith to Timothy, and whose faith in God lived on in him. We give great credit to the faith of our mothers and fathers, our grandparents and other faith ancestors. But we know that faith really comes from God, its power is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which we recognize and name in our baptism.

In the rite of Affirmation of Baptism (also known as Confirmation), we make public profession of our faith, as you and I promise to live among God’s faithful people, hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and strive for justice and peace in all the earth! How much faith do you need to keep your promises? More than you think you have? Or as little as a tiny mustard seed? Again, there is no need to berate yourself for your lack of faith or credit others with more than you have, because your faith cannot be measured, it can only be experienced as a gift from God, and shared!

So as Paul said in 2nd Timothy, *“I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. Amen.*