

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 (The Message)

1The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it:
God, how long do I have to cry out for help
before you listen?
How many times do I have to yell, “Help! Murder! Police!”
before you come to the rescue?
Why do you force me to look at evil,
stare trouble in the face day after day?
Anarchy and violence break out,
quarrels and fights all over the place.
Law and order fall to pieces.
Justice is a joke.
The wicked have the righteous hamstrung
and stand justice on its head.
God Says, “Look!”

2What’s God going to say to my questions? I’m braced for the worst.
I’ll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon.
I’ll wait to see what God says,
how he’ll answer my complaint.

And then God answered: “Write this.
Write what you see.
Write it out in big block letters
so that it can be read on the run.
This vision-message is a witness
pointing to what’s coming.
It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait!
And it doesn’t lie.
If it seems slow in coming, wait.
It’s on its way. It will come right on time.
“Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—
full of himself but soul-empty.
But the person in right standing before God
through loyal and steady believing
is fully alive, *really* alive.”¹

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2003). *The Message : The Bible in contemporary language*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.

Luke 17:1-10 (NRSV)

Some Sayings of Jesus
(Mt 18.6—9; Mk 9.42—48)

17 Jesus^a said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³Be on your guard! If another disciple^b sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a^c mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

⁷“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’ ”²

^a Gk *He*

^b Gk *your brother*

^c Gk *faith as a grain of*

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Faith, Forgiveness and Service

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: October 3, 2004

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Texts: *Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 17:1-10*

The prophet Habakkuk sounds a contemporary tone. Habakkuk cries out against the injustice and violence he sees around him. And Habakkuk cries out to God, "When are you going to do something about this?" Habakkuk is utterly certain that God ought to come to the rescue. Indeed, Habakkuk is furious that God has tarried and left him helpless.

Today justice is much admired, too. I watched the first Presidential debate the other night. Did some of you watch it? I read the next day that both sides thought they won. And I guess that's about right. Both men did fine. Neither made any significant mistakes. I think people who liked Kerry still like him, and I think people who liked Bush still like him. In fact, I was more surprised by the places where the two candidates agreed than I was at where they differed. And one place where they decidedly agreed was that we must use America's considerable military might to assure justice in the world by defeating terrorism. They disagreed about whether Iraq is a distraction. They disagreed about whether we should have built stronger international alliances if we were going to invade the country. But neither wanted to find himself in Habakkuk's situation in which violence and injustice had gotten the upper hand. Both men looked at the havoc and violence that terrorism creates and committed themselves to bring the perpetrators to justice. They assumed that it was obvious that the terrorists should be brought to justice. For neither candidate was there any question to be raised about this assumption.

I'm not a politician. I'm a preacher. And one thing preachers are supposed to do, I guess, is to look hard at assumptions. We're supposed to dig deep and honestly into our religious faith. We're supposed to look to the Bible for a message of truth. We're supposed to pray. And we're not supposed to base our beliefs on opinion polls. But, of course, it's not just preachers who are supposed to do these things. It's all of us. We are all supposed to try to live out our lives by what our religious faith tells us. And I'm here to tell you today that this isn't easy to do. You know that. How many times have you heard, or thought yourself, that what the prophets hear from God, or what Jesus says just isn't practical in real life? How many times have you thought, "Well that's a good message to hear in Sunday School, but it doesn't really work out in the world?" If you're like me, it's happened more than once.

Habakkuk is crying out to God for justice. And then God comes along and says, "Here you go Habakkuk. I want you to write this down so you can read it from a billboard. Here's my message: But the person in right standing before God through loyal and steady believing is fully alive, *really* alive." God says nothing about justice. God talks about steady belief and faithfulness. Habakkuk cries out that real killing and violence is going on, and God answers by saying that the person with loyal and steady believing is really alive. It's like God isn't listening. God answers with a big *non-sequitor*. It's like God is confused. Or at least it's for certain that God doesn't see things the same way Habakkuk does.

The Gospel reading this morning doesn't seem to help much, either. In the first few

verses Jesus talks about repentance and forgiveness. First he says that if someone repents, you must forgive them. So far so good. Many of us may have problems forgiving someone even if they say they are sorry, but most of us understand that we should. It makes sense. But then Jesus goes on and says that if a person offends you seven times in the same day and says I'm sorry, then you must forgive them each time. Now this is getting a little more dicey. If a person does the same thing seven times in one day and keeps saying, "Oh, I'm sorry about that," do you really think they are repenting? Do you really think they are sorry? No? Me either?

And you know what? Jesus didn't think so either. Jesus is saying that even if people don't repent, even if they aren't really sorry we are to forgive them.

Jesus' disciples are more than a little nonplused by this idea. They say to Jesus, "Your going to have to give us some bigger faith to forgive our neighbor who isn't even sorry." Underneath they are saying, "You are going to have to give us a ton of faith if we're going to just let injustice slide off our backs and not care about who's hurting us. We're going to need a lot of faith for that."

But Jesus rejects their idea that it is a greater amount of faith that they need. He says, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

In the *New Interpreter's Bible* Alan Culpepper says, "The reader may expect that Jesus would warmly receive the disciples' request for more faith. Instead, his sharp answer implies that they have not really understood the nature of genuine faith.... The point is not that they need more faith; rather, they need to understand that faith enables God to work in a person's life in ways that defy ordinary human experience." (p. 322)

Here we go. Our deepest misgiving has just been realized. Jesus is telling the disciples that it's not the amount of faith they are missing so much as it is the wrong kind. The trouble is, the kind Jesus is peddling doesn't add up. Jesus is telling us to have the kind of faith that goes directly against ordinary human experience, the kind of faith that goes against even our own well-being. That is, Jesus seems to be telling us that his kind of faith doesn't quite fit in the real world. No wonder we think Jesus is good for Sunday School, but not so good for Monday morning. This faith Jesus is telling us about sure won't win any elections. Jesus is saying to us that by his kind of faith we must forgive, when to do so clearly doesn't make any sense. Everyone knows that it takes force to stop violence, that it takes violence to stop violence.

*** But, of course, it is right here that Jesus wants to poke at the little knot in our stomachs that wonders if it is true, wonders if it is true that violence solves violence, even when it is violence committed in the name of justice.

Throughout human history violence has been used to stop violence. It is a deeply held truth in almost every culture. And yet the crop we continue to reap is more violence rather than more justice, more warfare rather than more justice, more genocides rather than more justice, more devastation rather than more justice. The news this very day tells the age-old story. In the Middle East the Israelis square against the Palestinians, the US against the Iraqi insurgents, the fundamentalist Muslims against the West, each claiming their violence to be done in the name of justice. And that is but one place on our beautiful blue planet where the old logic continues to play out its gruesome equation: if you do X, I will do Y in retribution.

In the most real sense Jesus, and especially Jesus' own violent death on the cross, stands as the cosmic counter-example to our bloody tendencies. When Peter took out his sword in the

Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told him to put it away. And then Jesus said, “Don’t you think my father has enough power to break up this little mob, if that were the right thing to do.” And when they hung Jesus on the cross, they laughed at him and said, “He claims he can tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Let him come down off the cross and save himself.” His response was simply to say, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus’ death on the cross saves us, not by paying God for our unworthiness, but by showing us that the way we solve our problems simply doesn’t work. Our violence creates more violence. Our version of justice creates more victims.

Here is where Jesus saves us. Paul Nuechterlein says it this way:

It's a peculiar way to save us from violence. Yes, I grant you that, but the cross can help us to finally see something we've never been able to see before -- namely, that since the beginning, human culture has always shaped us to believe that the only way to stop violence is with a righteous counter-violence. There are cultural forces that make it almost impossible for us to see the problem of violence any other way. It took the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ for God to get through to us at all. And still we resist.¹

It is right here that the rubber meets the road for us. Jesus asks us to consider, in Alan Culpepper’s words, “a faith [that] enables God to work in a person's life in ways that defy ordinary human experience.” That seems such a stretch for us. It seems to go against all the evidence, against our intuitions. But what is our real evidence? “100 million people horribly and tragically dead in wars and crimes of violence just the last century alone?”² The quagmires of war and bloodshed, hatred and violence in which we find ourselves today?

Is it not time for us to consider that the faith that seems defy human experience is actually a faith that illuminates a more truthful way, that exposes the lie that we have told ourselves forever about how human experience really works? Is it not time to consider that the message we learn in Sunday School may be a lot more effective on Monday morning than the worn out “real world” answers we keep turning to?

When I watched the debates the other night, I kept dreaming that there would be a candidate that would say, “My fellow Americans we stand at a time in human history when we need to take full and honest stock of ourselves, to be honest about our failures, and to assess our real and enormous possibilities.” I longed for a candidate who would say, “It is time for America to lead the world away from violence and war and toward hope and peace, time for America to lead the world in honest and mutual respect for one another, time for America to lead the world in understanding that our hatreds of one another destroy the very things we most seek, the very things for which we most yearn. It is time for all of us to discover that forgiveness, love and hope have more power than all the bombings can ever have, time to discover a different moral beginning point for human societies.” More than anything, I would have loved to have heard proclaimed a new day of faith, forgiveness and service. Amen.

¹http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/proper22c_2001_ser.htm

²Ibid