

C Lectionary 27 10.6.19
Luke 17:5-10
Focus Statement: Faith

One of the hosts on the preaching podcast I listen to said this week that a preacher should, and I quote, “by all means, preach on Habakkuk this weekend.” And then, as if David had listened to the same podcast, he picked a choir piece based on the Habakkuk reading, so here we go. First off, because you may not know anything about Habakkuk, or even that it was a book in the Bible, a bit of introduction. Habakkuk is one of the twelve minor prophets. Minor not because they’re unimportant, but because the books are short, compared to books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Speaking of Jeremiah, Habakkuk was probably a contemporary of his time, speaking to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah during the time of King Jehoiakim around the turn of the sixth century BCE. Which is really nothing more than your fun fact for the day because what I love about prophets is the timelessness of their messages, and that is certainly true about Habakkuk. Because whoever he was speaking to, the message he was delivering is one that feels super pertinent to today, the challenge of believing in a just God in the midst of an unjust world.

Habakkuk opens with this plea—actually we cannot even call it a plea, so much as a complaint to God for justice, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, “Violence!” and you will not save?... Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.” With Habakkuk, we hear a prophet who has waited long enough, and instead clamors, seriously, Lord, how long must we wait. You say you are a God of justice, so let’s see it.

I've mentioned before in recent sermons that I, like Habakkuk, am over it. I'm over thoughts and prayers that have no effect on the pandemic of gun violence. I'm over pretending that our climate is not changing, and that we humans are not the cause. I'm over the crisis at the border, I'm over the images of children in cages. I'm over the uncertainty, I'm over the failure to take action, I'm over living in a world where refugees are treated like a plague, people in poverty a problem, and those who cry for justice are labeled troublemakers, while dictators are eased and appeased, the powerful are given more power, and we are told not to trust what we see. I'm over it.

And with Habakkuk we get a prophet who's not just over it, not just a prophet who demands God to do something, but a prophet who isn't going anywhere until those demands are met. We skipped the section of chapter one where God answered, and Habakkuk challenged that answer, but we pick up again in chapter two with Habakkuk's continued determination, "I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me." Habakkuk is going to wait God out, going to wait for the answer he wants, the answer he needs, no matter how long that takes. And that, dear people of God, is what I think faith is. Faith is waiting, it's waiting it out, it's waiting for God, waiting on God.

Faith is waiting, but it's also not passive. By waiting, I don't mean that sort of "thoughts and prayers" sort of faith that we hear so much of these days, where we pray and then hope God will change the injustice of the world. Rather it is waiting in the way of Habakkuk, who is active in his declaration of injustice and his demand for action.

In the Gospel reading for this morning, the disciples asked Jesus, “increase our faith.” Which seems like a noble question, right? The thing that prompted the disciples request was Jesus’ command in verse four that if someone sinned against them and repented not just seven times, but seven times in one day, still the disciples were to forgive them. In verse five, we see the disciples’ response: well now Jesus, that sounds pretty hard so, if you want us to do that, you’re going to have to increase our faith. To which Jesus responded with this weird line about mustard seeds and mulberry trees. Which if you think it’s confusing in the translation, there’s all sorts of weird things packed into the Greek. My understanding of the nuances of grammar has never been all that good, so I’m going to just tell you the words I read in the commentary and maybe any of you English teachers in the room can explain it to the rest of us. Apparently the second clause in this sentence, the one about the mulberry tree, is what is known as a “second-class conditional phrase, a statement contrary to fact.” What that means is, that is the part of the sentence that proves the example. So basically, there’s an unspoken second part of this sentence that reads like this: “If you 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, [but you cannot command a mulberry tree and have it obey you, so you do not have faith the size of a mustard seed].”

What I think Jesus was saying to the disciples here wasn’t that they didn’t need more faith, but that they didn’t even understand what faith is. Asking for more faith in order to do hard things is having faith in faith. It’s believing that faith will save you, that you can earn God’s grace through your faith. And yes, as Lutherans we believe and confess, as is written

in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, that "by grace [we] have been saved through faith." But the faith through which we have been saved is not our faith, it's God's. The line from Ephesians goes on, "by grace [we] have been saved through faith, and this is not of [our] own doing; it is the gift of God... so that no one may boast." What the disciples needed to do the hard thing Jesus was asking wasn't more faith, what they needed was God's faith. And that is a thing we don't have to ask for, that is a thing we are gifted by God, that is grace.

Then Jesus went on with this parable about slaves, and how slaves shouldn't expect to be praised for doing their duties, should not be thanked for their work or served at the table. So too, should the disciples, when they live rightly, expect Jesus to give them special reward or treatment. But I was thinking about this, actually Eileen got me thinking about this in Bible study. Remember last week in the parable about the rich man and Lazarus, and I talked about how the parable ends with the chasm being uncrossable and people not believing even if someone rose from the dead. But the story itself doesn't end that way, because we know that Jesus did rise from the dead, and in doing so Jesus didn't just cross the chasm but in fact closed it. That same thing happens here. Because Jesus told the disciples, who among you would serve your slaves, and so you should say, "we are worthless slaves," but think about what Jesus himself is going to do. We say it every Sunday, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples. The disciples didn't deserve this. They were all about to abandon him, one was about to deny him, and one was straight up going to betray him, so in no way are these guys doing "what they ought to have done" and yet, Jesus did to them exactly what he remarked that no one would do. Not because of their

great faith did he do this, he did this, he does this, because of his great faith. We are saved by grace through the faith of God, when we have not even the faith of a mustard seed—because I don't know about you, but I had a mulberry tree in my yard when I moved in, and all it did was make a mess. And even now that dad cut it down for me, it remains firmly rooted in place, so clearly my lack of a mustard seed of faith isn't uprooting any trees—the faith that changes us is the faith of God in us, through us, that is the faith that changes the world.

The faith of Habakkuk is a faith in God, not in faith, but in God. A faith that waits on God, a faith that says, even though I have no faith that anything will change, still I will wait on you to answer, wait on you to move, wait on you to fulfill your justice. The faith of Habakkuk is a faith that perseveres despite all evidence to the contrary that our actions have meaning, because the faith is not in our actions, but in God who acts. I'll share with you what that looks like for me. For me it looks like doing what I can do for climate action, for the refugee crisis, for gun violence reform. It means I call my congressperson, even though all I do is leave messages and we just about never vote the same way, I bring reusable bags to the store, I've gotten more conscientious about rinsing out things before I recycle them, I read the advocacy updates from Samaritas and the ELCA and I share them with you all, I crack jokes with the Co-op members, I listen to their stories, and I try to be a reminder of God's presence in their lives. I do these things because as meaningless as those tiny actions may be, I refuse to give in in the face of hopelessness, I refuse to believe that my actions don't matter, I refuse to believe that God is not still at work in the world and that these things are not having an impact.

The book of Habakkuk ends with this declaration of confidence, which the choir will sing as their offering piece today. The words from Habakkuk go like this:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,

and no fruit is on the vines;

though the produce of the olive fails,

and the fields yield no food;

though the flock is cut off from the fold,

and there is no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will exult in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;

he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,

and makes me tread upon the heights.

Faith doesn't change the world around us, faith changes us to change the world. And it's not our faith that does the changing, it is the faith of God, a faith that is slow, so much slower than our human time scale wants or can grasp, but that is real and relentless and permanent. So have faith, dear friends in Christ. Have faith not in faith, and have faith not in you. But have faith in God, who is faithful. Amen.