

Sermon for Proper 22, Year C
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Sometime around the turn of the sixth century B.C., the prophet Habakkuk had a vision of God's plan to destroy Judah by the onslaught of the Babylonians. The Chaldeans of our reading are the ethnic group in control of the Babylonian Empire. The vision troubled Habakkuk. And our reading this morning is a record of his subsequent dialogue with God.

The vision troubled Habakkuk because it didn't seem just. The prophet is aware that Judah is not entirely righteousness. He says, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear?" The evil all around him is ongoing. But now God seems to be adding evil to evil. As if unfaithful Judeans aren't bad enough, now the pagan Chaldeans will be allowed to oppress God's people. The Chaldeans "sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!" How can the God whom Habakkuk worships do such a thing as this? Punish the wicked, yes. But reward the even wickeder Babylonians? Never. And what about the suffering of the righteous people of God at the hands of these pagans? The prophet appeals to the very nature of the God of justice when he says, "Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?"

Now this immediately poses a question. How should we respond when God seems to us to be unjust? Should we just suck it up? Is there a proper way to approach God with this kind of complaint? Or, having dared to challenge the Almighty, should the prophet simply run for cover?

As it happens, Habakkuk gives us a model answer to this question. He has dared to question God, not out of pride, but out of faith. And so he also dares to wait on God's answer. "I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint." The prophet uses the image of a watchman standing on duty in a watchtower. He expects God to answer his complaint, and he will not hide from God or from the answer. He sets himself in a high and obvious place, ready to hear from God. And he is also ready to respond to God, if God comes to question him.

Habakkuk has placed himself in a long line of questioners who trusted God enough to have real conversations with him. Job, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah. These were all willing to challenge God. They also knew that they had to

be willing to take their lumps, if God was displeased with them. But they loved God and trusted him enough to be open about their doubts.

And here is the amazing thing: This attitude is rewarded by God. What follows in Habakkuk is one of the most understated lines in the Bible. “And the Lord answered me”. The Lord didn’t strike him down. God didn’t say, “Well, I guess you’re just not the prophet I thought you were.” God didn’t even say, “I don’t think I’ll talk to you anymore.” God answered him.

The answer that is recorded for us doesn’t deal directly with every line of Habakkuk’s complaint. Rather, it answers the heart of Habakkuk’s anxiety. We will never understand everything that the Almighty does, but he reassures us about his ultimate intention. “Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.” The prophet is to write down the vision of God’s justice in large plain letters, so that it doesn’t take a lot of study to understand it. Even if you’re just running by, you should be able to read it. Even though it seems as though the unrighteous are winning, ultimately it is not so. Justice may seem slow in coming, but it will come, and will not be delayed. It will come in God’s perfect time.

The upshot of all this is that the outcomes of things are not ours to manage or control. The outcome of anything is in God’s hands. We are too small and too imperfect to control it in any case. What is in our control is simply our own faithfulness to God and his commands. We do what we know God wants us to do, because we love him, and we know that he loves us. Everything else is up to him.

Of course, since Habakkuk learned this lesson, we have seen God act in ways that would have absolutely floored him, no matter how much faith he had. We now know how God planned to deal with the injustice in the world. He took it on himself. St. Paul writes to St. Timothy of God, “who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Habakkuk would have recognized the principle: God has his own unsearchable purpose into which he calls us, and he intends to save his faithful in the end.

But because of what Jesus has done for us, the Christian version of this takes on even more urgency. We are commissioned to tell the story of what God has done in the world. People need to know it, and we must proclaim it in both word and deed. “God did not give us a spirit of timidity,” St. Paul says, “but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” A better translation of “timidity” would probably be “cowardice”. So we are to be courageous. We are to be powerful, loving, and self-controlled. But what toward what obstacle is our courage to be directed? Ignorance and unbelief of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “Do not be

ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God”.

Once again, we will not understand everything God is doing. Some of it will seem unjust. Our calling to spread the word about Jesus is a calling to share in his sufferings, as St. Paul points out. “But,” he says, “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.” There it is again: We do what we know God wants us to do, because we love him and we know he loves us. “I know whom I have believed”.

Of course, it isn’t just cowardice and our perception of injustice that cause us to fail. Sometimes our motives get twisted, even when we recognize the principle of faith. The apostles understood that the righteous live by their faith. That’s why they asked Jesus to increase it. They had stopped simply doing what the Lord wanted them to do. Instead, they were thinking about all the great things they were going to accomplish for him.

And Jesus answer is designed to bring them back down to reality. “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, ‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” In other words, “Don’t get big heads. You don’t need a lot of faith. You just need enough to trust me and do what I ask you to do. You don’t do things on your own power. Put your faith in me, and I will do the rest.” And he further compares them to slaves. In other words, just do as you’re told. We are servants of God, doing what he asks for love of him. No delusions of grandeur ought to get the better of us, or we will start worrying about outcomes, rather than simply doing what we know he wants us to do. At the end of the day, we are owed no extraordinary reward for simply doing as we’re told. “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.” But we also haven’t tried to wrest control from him in matters too weighty for us.

Even to be slaves of the eternal, loving, almighty Father of creation is a destiny more glorious than any other you can possibly imagine. And to have a clear duty to perform is a blessing beyond imagination. Ours is to witness to what God has done. No more, no less. God has done, and is doing, marvelous things, in history and in our lives. And he asks that we tell the world about it, not only with our lips (as the prayer book has it), but in our lives, by giving up our selves to his service, and by walking before him in holiness and righteousness all our days. But don’t forget that that assumes that we are doing it with our lips as well.

We don’t have to worry about the outcome of evangelism, because we’re not the Holy Spirit. But we do have to do it, because it is our duty. We do what God asks us to do, because we love him and we know he loves us.