

Increase Our Faith

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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 NIV

The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.
How long, O Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted. . . .

I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.
Then the Lord replied:
"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come and will not delay.
"See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright-
but the righteous will live by his faith."

Luke 17:1-10 RSV

And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come!

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

And the Lord said, "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.

"Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

I think we would all join with the disciples in making that same request of the Lord, "Increase our faith." Do any of us feel that he or she has faith adequate for the needs and challenges of life today? If so, you should be the one standing in this pulpit and sharing your secret with the rest of us!

The need for greater faith is always evident when we come to preaching about it. Somebody once defined a sermon as *the application of faith people don't have to problems the preacher doesn't understand*. Well, I think we might question that definition as far as the second part is concerned.

Preachers and problems are no strangers to each other. Whether it's difficult relationships, financial struggles, self-doubt, troublesome habits and behavior patterns, health issues, disillusionment with the way our culture is going, or whatever, the preacher sees his share of problems as you well know. But the first part of the definition might hold true — “the application of faith people don't have.” And it's not the people of the congregation only who would plead for more faith, but the preacher too. I've heard it said that some guys become ministers because they know that, if they didn't, they might not even attend church — such is our struggle with the question of faith.

The Scripture lessons for today from Habakkuk and Luke are those assigned for the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, and both of these passages are concerned with faith. Let's look first at our passage from Habakkuk.

When was the last time you heard a sermon based on the Book of Habakkuk? We don't get around to him very often, but he was a prophet with something to say on this question of faith. And the reason he had something to say about it was that he had his own struggles, just like you and I. This prophet lived during a time of great turmoil and uncertainty in the history of his people. Just when that time was, is hard to determine from the evidence in the book. It could have been the last decades of the kingdom of Judah, around 600 BC, as the Assyrians and then the Babylonians were closing in on the tiny nation and threatening its independence. Or possibly Habakkuk lived later, after the Babylonian exile, and was apprehensive about the advance of the ruthless armies of Alexander the Great. We don't know. All we know is that things weren't going well, both internationally and within Habakkuk's own environment.

So Habakkuk takes up the role of the biblical prophet, acting as the spokesman of his people before the Lord, crying out for help amidst the problems of his day. “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” He isn't complaining about his *personal* situation, but is speaking for his people. There is violence and injustice all around him. Why does the Lord tolerate this situation, he wants to know. Why doesn't the Lord step in to save his people? But it's not just an outside threat that has Habakkuk agitated. It looks like the Judeans have forgotten their own God-given principles, that Law of Moses that governs human relationships in a just society. “Therefore the law is paralyzed,” Habakkuk complains, “and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”

I wonder if any of this sounds familiar to us, in a day of terrorist threats from outside our borders and attacks on Christian standards from within our own culture. If a preacher is supposed to help people apply their faith to their problems, Habakkuk was well aware of the problems. But he does seem to have an issue regarding his faith — his trust in the Lord to see his people through their difficulties. It didn't seem like the Lord was ready to intervene to save his beleaguered community. In fact, it took a word from the Lord to convince Habakkuk that faith would prevail in the end!

Habakkuk was so hungry for that word from the Lord that he compared himself to a watchman, standing guard on the walls of a city and scouting the night horizon for any sign of threatening activity. Watchmen were very important in the days before electric power made instant communication possible. There was no radar sweeping the skies for enemy bombers or missiles, no early warning system, no way to detect an approaching attack at some remote outpost and radio the city's defenders so they could prepare for it. Instead, somebody had to walk the city walls and keep a constant lookout for anything that looked suspicious. Habakkuk was eager to hear from the Lord, so he took his stand like a watchman, scouting the spiritual horizon for anything that would reveal the Lord's answer to his plea for help.

And the revelation came at last. “Then the Lord replied: ‘Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. See, he is puffed up [that is, the wicked enemy]; his desires are not upright — but *the righteous will live by his faith.*’”

“The righteous will live by his faith.” In other words, those who are in a right relationship with the Lord will survive through difficult times by trusting in him. Righteousness, in the Bible, is not a quality we possess but a relationship we have with our Father. And faith is not a set of doctrines but an abiding trust that our Father will take care of us. Biblical faith is really a *family thing*. If we're in the family, we know that we'll be okay in the end. Difficulties may come — they *will* come — but if we don't let them destroy that family love we have for God, that loyalty we have as members of his covenant, then in the end things *will work out*. And, if they don't work out the way we would like them to, we can still be faithful

members of God's people and praise him even through our problems. Listen to what Habakkuk has to say in chapter 3:

I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places. (Habakkuk 3:16-19)

No, sometimes the fig tree doesn't blossom for us, sometimes our harvest basket comes back with nothing in it, sometimes the livestock pen is empty. You fill in the blanks for your own situation. But, says Habakkuk, I will still praise God; in fact, I will *dance with joy* before him, because he is still my God. For, as he says, "the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). Things may go badly for me from time to time, but God is still God and he's still worthy of my praise.

Now Jesus' disciples didn't have a problem with faith because of violence, injustice, economic deprivation or other difficulties. To see what their problem was, and why they asked Jesus, "Increase our faith," we have to look at what Jesus had just said to them:

And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:1-4)

It was when Jesus said this that the apostles pled with him, "Increase our faith." You see, we're naturally programmed to defend ourselves and stick up for our own rights, to insist that offenses against us get punished. Now here's Jesus telling us, "If someone wrongs you, and then is sorry about it, you have to forgive him. You can't hold onto your resentment." To give up our anger, defensiveness and resentment takes *faith*.

Habakkuk's faith wavered because of things going on outside of himself: enemy invasion, violence and injustice in society, disregard for God's law. The disciples found their faith on shaky ground when they discovered they had to *change their own behavior*. Sometimes we can handle all kinds of external problems without a crisis of faith, but when it comes to becoming a different sort of person — that's where our faith runs into rocky terrain. The thing we hold onto the hardest is our identity, our sense of who we are and what kind of behavior is most comfortable and familiar to us. The biggest sacrifice we can make is to give up that self-image and be willing for the Lord to make us into something different, something better than what we are now. It's a scary thing to think of becoming a changed person; no wonder the disciples asked, "Increase our faith."

Some years ago a professor named Paul Vitz published a book called *Psychology as Religion: the Cult of Self-Worship*. That book opened my eyes, and over the decades I have seen the truth of Dr. Vitz's thesis writ large over our North American culture. For if our society has any official religion at all, it is indeed the religion of *self-worship*. Think of all the slogans you hear: "Have it your way . . . Be all you can be . . . Do your own thing . . . I gotta be *me*." This philosophy is truly the religion of most Americans, and its favorite anthem is the one sung by Frank Sinatra: "I did it *my way*." This is the worship of unholy trinity: Me, Myself and I.

This doctrine of the *imperial self* pervades our media, our schools, our courts. It lies at the heart of judicial decisions favoring abortion or euthanasia or homosexual "marriage," and there is no telling what degeneration and cruelty it will lead to if it isn't supplanted by another religion, a religion that says, "Don't try to *be yourself*, for the self you would be isn't very good, or very happy, or responsive to the needs of others. Instead, 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires' (Romans 13:14) . . . "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

The disciples, like you and me, had to learn to get their focus off their own resentment and defensiveness and put their trust in the Lord. Faced with the need to change their behavior, they asked the right question: "Increase our faith." But what Jesus offered them was no easy panacea for what ailed them. In fact, he laid on his followers a further challenge. He said, in effect, the life of faith isn't a life of smug self-satisfaction in our status or achievement. It's a life of unselfish service, a life of giving without

thought of being repaid, a life of letting go of all claims to appreciation, or dreams of accolades and kudos. It's a life of simple obedience to God — and that's what faith really is, when you get right down to it, *obedience* to our Father, the head of our family. And when you and I fulfill our responsibilities within the household of God, that in itself is our satisfaction. As Jesus said, "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

It's a challenge, then, this life of faith, whether we come at it from the standpoint of Habakkuk the prophet or from the perspective of Jesus' disciples. But it's a challenge that leads to a great reward. Jesus hinted at this reward when he told his disciples, "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." Even a little bit of faith, if it's true obedience to the Lord and an abiding trust in his purpose for us, will go a long way. Jesus pointed to the sycamine tree — the New International Version calls it a mulberry — and he said that our faith could even uproot that tree and place it in the sea.

Did he mean this literally, or was it a figure of speech to show how far faith would carry us? I don't know. I don't believe Jesus was in the habit of suggesting useless or frivolous activity, and personally I don't see the use of growing mulberry trees in the ocean. But there could be more here than meets the eye. Jesus called his disciples to be a renewed nation of Israel — that's why there were twelve of them, like the twelve tribes. And the mission of Israel was to be "a light to the nations," to carry the Word of the Lord, and his blessing, to all peoples. In the Bible the sea is a symbol for the Gentiles, the heathen nations of the earth, and the tree is a symbol for Israel. Was Jesus calling his apostles — and that includes us — to a renewed faith in their mission under God, and reminding them that through this faith the Gospel would be planted in the life of all peoples everywhere? If so, we're part of this enterprise today both through our support of the world mission of the church and through our personal witness to those close to us.

In another place, Jesus speaks of mountain-moving faith. Our trust in God, our obedience to his ways, *will* sweep aside obstacles to victorious living and open up to us a future as changed and renewed persons. In fact, it will carry us into eternal life through the might of Christ our risen Lord. As we gather today at his table, let's remember to *come* in faith, *receive* in faith, and *depart* in faith because we have met with him in obedience to his command, "Do this in remembrance of me."

To close, let me read a poem that Shirley Anne wrote not long ago, called "The Sycamine Tree Lesson."

*You offered possibility
of casting trees into the sea,
and spoke to nature much as though
Adam's dominion yet were so!*

*Do You grieve over our weak faith,
our waste of time in lame debate
propounding creeds of little use
for setting captives fully loose?*

*It seems You never drew back from
unsettling nature with aplomb!
When this your followers did appall,
You chided them for faith too small.*

*Was it to teach us that we, too,
have all authority to do
Your work with supernatural power —
available to us this hour?*

*Your gospel teaches, line by line,
to heed the lowly sycamine
and set our sights beyond the scope
of earthlings, to a greater hope!*

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