

Increase Our Faith!

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4 Luke 17: 5-10

This is not the way it's supposed to be. It's too hard. It isn't happening. There must be something else to this. What's missing? Maybe we need more of whatever it is. Yeah, that's it! We need more, or we need better, or we need whatever it is that we don't have, or don't have enough of.

We like to imagine that there is some magic that can make things happen, or some creative way to overcome hard realities. Simplistic responses can be all the rage.

We laugh at remedies in old newspapers and magazines, the stuff that hucksters would peddle. Amazing elixirs, potent syrups, mystery potions, and scientific pills were available for a price to fix whatever ailed and afflicted. There was a remedy, a solution, a cure for the malady that beset you.

But what if there really isn't one? We'd be loath to admit that we'd have to struggle on, coping with our situation, hoping that we could make the best of it. The storybook version of a white knight, a magical potion, the superhero, the precious amulet, the miraculous waters, or the amazing herb wouldn't really prove to change things. In fact, such artificial, contrived interventions often miss the point. It isn't easy. If it was easy, it would be done by now.

If you're seeking a new direction, make sure that your answer actually addresses the issue and isn't some fantasy that denies reality. That's the problem with the faithful in our scripture lessons. They seem to demand resources for what they face, but they've conveniently ignored the reality. Their demands may make a certain degree of sense, but they're demanding divine intervention. They want their fantasy fulfilled, rather than working through what they must work through themselves.

We don't read much of Habakkuk, but then there isn't much to read anyway. This prophet is likely active just a decade or two before Jeremiah comes on the scene.

We have two separate passages. First, we get a complaint from God's prophet, and in the second, we hear a response from God.

The complaint of the prophet demands to know why God is allowing violence and injustice, strife and conflict. Why is the law paralyzed and why does justice always fail? The righteous are beset by the wicked and can never gain justice. The prophet cries out: *How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*

Clearly, Habakkuk falls among the social justice prophets who know that their society is rife with injustice. The righteous are afflicted, maligned, and denied, likely losing earnings, property, and more, as well as getting beaten, imprisoned, and maybe even enslaved. In this toxic environment, Habakkuk wants to know where God's justice is. Is God indifferent to the suffering of the righteous? How can God continue to let this

happen? This is, of course, the question of all of the faithful who have seen injustice prevail, seeming to be allowed time after time when God demands justice. It's an age-old question that sets God's presence over against the presence of injustice, or really, evil of any kind.

The second selection in chapter two brings God's response. The key phrase comes in the beginning of God's response: *Write the vision*. That's it: *Write the vision*. You write the vision so that you won't forget the vision. You write the vision because you need to see the vision spelled out plainly before you. You need to write the vision so that the vision can be shared with others who share the struggle. You need to write the vision because the vision is why you struggle for justice.

God continues. *Make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it*. The vision is not something difficult to understand, or some long, windy proclamation. The vision is short and simple, readily shared among diverse people of all walks of life. It is the vision of the Kingdom where justice comes to all people, where peace is the goal, where reconciliation unites, where prosperity and abundance is shared, and where life's promise is fulfilled.

But we can hear the protest: what about this Kingdom? When shall it come, and when will God provide it? The answer from God: *For the vision awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end, and will not prove false. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, and will not delay*.

Here we have a very early mention of the coming of the end, the end of the age when injustice and oppression, violence and death are the hallmarks of society. Jesus will be talking about the same coming of the end of the age, imminently coming as the herald has already proclaimed the way in John the Baptist, and Jesus comes to set the stage for the end of the age. Just as Habakkuk's herald announces a vision of the Kingdom to God's faithful, Jesus announces the good news of the Kingdom to the same people in his era.

The vision of the Kingdom is not easily met and fulfilled. It requires long struggle and frustratingly difficult and often unsuccessful work. The vision is what sustains, knowing that God is not indifferent but passionately concerned, but that the time has not yet come.

God is not indifferent, and it shows. God takes note of what God sees; the proud are puffed up and their desires are unjust. But God also sees the righteous and they strive forward, moved by faith in the righteousness and justice of their God. *The righteous one will live by his faith*. The arduous work goes on to seek justice, to gain freedom from the yoke of oppression and to gain the peace that brings growth and prosperity and new life.

There is no divine intervention that can be demanded by the prophet. He gets rebuffed and reminded that the hard work of the struggle must continue. The vision of the Kingdom must sustain until the time becomes fulfilled and the Kingdom goal is

finally embraced.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus speaks with his circle of disciples. Prior to our passage, Jesus has just told them that if a brother sins, then they must forgive that brother repeatedly, *ad nauseum!* Their response starts today's passage as they cry out, *Lord, increase our faith!*

They're clearly overwhelmed by the thought of extending such forgiveness. They feel weak and inadequate for the task. As their failure to attain this high expectation looms before them, they despair and reach out for divine intervention. It is beyond their imagining that such forgiveness could be achieved. Something supernatural would have to occur for them to meet what their Lord has just prescribed.

To this cry for greater faith, for divine intervention, Jesus provides a reminder of the power of faith. He makes it clear that faith is not a substance, not an item, not a thing measured by volume. Faith even as miniscule as a tiny mustard seed has the power to transcend what you could imagine possible – uprooting a full tree, like the one we lost outside, and commanding its planting in the sea. And faith, such as this, is not a matter that requires divine intervention to be obtained.

Such faith is nothing exceptional. In fact, such faith is the rule of the disciple of Jesus, of the servant of the Kingdom. That's why we have the story of the servant and the master. It's as if Jesus is the master and the disciples are the servants. Do they expect their witness to faith in God to bring them some special reward, like Jesus is going to get off the throne and give them his seat? They shouldn't wait for that.

Faith is again portrayed as the regular thing that defies measure, denies reason, and dares the world. Faith insists that God is sovereign, and because it relies on the promise of God. That promise and the results it brings are beyond measure.

But faith requires work. Faith isn't easy. Yes, it's commonly available to those who seek to reap its harvest. But it's faint showing in the world is the result of those who seek the quick answer, the ready cure, and the magic potion. If it was so easy, it wouldn't require our struggle to make it come about in our lives.

In a world and in times that are challenging and difficult, that reveal deep problems and cloud the horizon with dismay, we may find it surprising to realize that hope and faith are alive and well, waiting to be utilized by a good and committed servant for the work of the Kingdom.

It is summed up in the tiny fragment of bread and the little cup that we will soon share. Commonly accessible items become symbols that recall the oracles of prophets and the teachings of the Lord that faith brings miracles to those who will commit to the hard, long, and often seemingly fruitless work for the Kingdom of justice and peace, and seeking to reap the harvest of new life that the Lord invites us to share with him.