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

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's Bible readings contain two heart-rending cries. They were first heard on the lips of an ancient people, yet they are surprisingly modern and fresh and probably always will be till Christ's kingdom comes. The first cry concerns unanswered prayer. The second concerns faith.

We find the first cry on the lips of the prophet Habakkuk. It is the cry of a man who is weary of the world and discouraged in his prayer life. And so it is that the prophet surveys the world around him, sighs, and asks this question of his Maker:

²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?(Hab 1:2)

The second cry bursts forth from the hearts of the apostles who have just heard some troubling preaching by their Lord. Do not lead others astray, Jesus has been saying, only his manner of saying it is especially frightening. Here we have it, just a couple verses before this morning's Gospel Lesson:

¹Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! ²It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.(Luke 17:1-2, KJV)

Next Jesus preaches about tireless forgiveness, requiring of his disciples that they be continually open to forgiving the repentant one:

³Take heed to yourselves: If thy

brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. ⁴And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.(Luke 17:3-4, KJV)

And then the apostles say the perfect thing, in my opinion. They respond to our Lord's warning about the millstone hanged about the neck and our Lord's exhortation to untiring forgiveness with the fundamental cry:

And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.(Luke 17:5, KJV)

There is a child-like spiritual genius in this cry: Increase our faith. For if our faith is strong, we will not mislead others and we will not fail to forgive.

Let us linger with these two cries: the cry of the one weary with the world and discouraged in prayer, "How long?" and the cry of the one who senses a fundamental spiritual inadequacy: "Lord, increase our faith."

First, the cry of the weary one, "How long?"

The prophet Habakkuk raises to the international level the question of unanswered prayer. The man has lived long enough to see two kinds of wickedness in the land, and he is tired of them both. The first wickedness concerns chaos and injustice within his own nation. The other wickedness concerns chaos and injustice laid upon his nation by a fierce foreign nation. I speak of the ancient Babylonians.

Habakkuk was of the same generation as that mighty prophet Jeremiah. Both prophets seem to have grown old, sick at heart at the corruption within the land, and terrified about what would come of their fellow citizens if those people did not repent and return to the Lord. Habakkuk, for example, presses the Lord about the ongoing miseries of Judah. You get the feeling that Habakkuk would gladly go blind if

he could, but he cannot, and so he goes on seeing things that alarm him about his land:

³Why do you make me see wrongdoing, why do you countenance oppression? Plundering and violence confront me, contention and discord flourish. ⁴And so the law loses its grip and justice never emerges, since the wicked outwits the upright and so justice comes out perverted.(Habakkuk 1:3-4, NJB)

From high to low, people are ignoble. Why, even the President seems corrupt and thereby gives a bad example for the people. I am speaking of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah. He uses conscripted labor to build himself a palace:

... who says, "I shall build myself a spacious palace with airy upstairs rooms," who makes windows in it, panels it with cedar, and paints it vermilion.(Jeremiah 22:14)

The man has a passion for cedar, but does not care to examine the cases of poor and needy. He has eyes and heart for nothing but his own interests, for shedding innocent blood and perpetrating violence and oppression.(Jer. 22:13-19) Jehoiakim is an egoist. What kind of a king can he be? And what kind of a world must Habakkuk and his neighbors live in? The powerful in the land take the lead of the king and the so "the law loses its grip and justice never emerges, since the wicked outwits the upright and so justice comes out perverted."

Habakkuk sees these things and in the seeing, he becomes discouraged. And not only that, his weakened and corrupt land is then conquered by the Babylonians:

...that fierce and fiery nation who march miles across country to seize the homes of others. ⁷They are dreadful and awesome, a law and authority to themselves. ⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at night; their horsemen

gallop on, their horsemen advance from afar, swooping like an eagle anxious to feed. ⁹They are all bent on violence, their faces scorching like an east wind; they scoop up prisoners like sand. ¹⁰They scoff at kings, they despise princes. They make light of all fortresses: they heap up earth and take them.(Hab 1:6-10)

And so Habakkuk brings his complaint to the Lord. How long, O Lord, must I see such things? How long must they be there to be seen? How long will violence, discord, and corruption continue?

Have you ever contemplated our world, sighed, and joined the lament of Habakkuk? Have you ever gazed around and found yourself muttering, "Things just are not right! I do not know how much longer we can go on. Bullets are flying, people are cursing, jobs are drying up, hearts are being broken. There is too little politeness, too little patriotism, too little nobility of spirit."

And besides such human limitations and moral fragmentation within the land, there are "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"

the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns¹

according to which the wicked flourish, the righteous languish, and the young die too soon.

Carol and I recently rented a DVD called "After the Wedding." It was a Danish film, and so we depended on the English subtitles. Many things go on in the movie, of course, but a most touching scene is when the father in the family breaks down and weeps because he is dying. He has every thing good going for him except health. He is wealthy and respected. Indeed he is a billionaire head of an international flourishing company. He is a loving father and is loved by

¹ Hamlet, Act 3, 1.

his wife and children. He has done a lot of good in the world, but now he is dying of cancer. He is forty-eight years old, dying of cancer, and suddenly his brave appearance breaks down and falls into his wife's arms and weeps over the kind of thing many people weep over: that life is so strange, so vulnerable, so sad. How long, O Lord, how long?

To this world-weary question, the Lord urges patience and hope. You see, there is quite a difference between looking at the world simply with the eyes and what they can see, versus looking at the world with hope and with faith. There is quite a difference. A world of difference.

And so the Lord gives answer to Habakkuk's sign. The Lord declines to answer the question, When? but he does reassure Habakkuk that good is coming:

²Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

Never lose your vision of this world as the Lord wants it to be. Never forget that reality is moving along toward extraordinary goodness — an everlasting world of peace and joy, righteousness and justice. The chaos of life will certainly give way to the Kingdom of God, as the image in a telescope resolves into clarity at last.

Meanwhile, the Lord says, live in faith. Live a life that amounts to an "Amen" to the divine vision. Fret not about evil-doers, as our Psalm says, "For they shall soon wither like the grass, and the like green grass fade away." (Psalm 37) Be not forgetful of divine determination that this world shall end in peace, and that you shall be part of it. Meanwhile, seek that peace and justice that will mark the end of all things.

The Lord tells Habakkuk that "the righteous live by their faith," which is a famous line quoted three times in the New Testament. The righteous *live* by faith. That is how the righteous go about living: they live by faith.

In this morning's Gospel Lesson, the apostles pray for increase of their faith.

The apostles said to the Lord,
"Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5)

This too is a very modern and human cry. I sometimes think to myself, "If I had the faith of Pastor Shaheen, then I would be a better pastor and I would be better able to weather the troubles of life." And I bet that if we were to let our eyes wonder around this congregation, many of us could sign and say, "I wish I had the faith of so-and-so. Then I would be kinder, then I would be more patient, then I would have more peace."

The interesting thing about our Lord's answer to the apostolic plea for an increase of faith is that Jesus shifts the conceptuality concerning faith. Instead of granting an increase of faith, Jesus answers that any faith at all is enough:

⁶And 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. (Luke 17:6)

It would take a giant to uproot that mulberry bush with its deep roots and to cast it into the sea, but faith is sufficient, Jesus says, even faith so small as a grain of mustard seed. Thus, Jesus speaks of faith as a quantum. Quantum faith. Any unit of faith at all is enough.

But I think we should not be surprised at this because it corresponds to the Bible's ancient conviction that there are but two paths lying before us: the path of sin and the path of piety:

¹Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

²But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

³And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth

his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

⁴The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.(Psalm 1:1-4)

Either we are walking toward God or we are walking away. If we are walking toward him, then we are walking in faith, and that is enough. Thus, we have a great democracy of faith: the babe in Christ is as mighty as the seasoned grey-haired saint, for both are pointing in the right direction: they are directing themselves toward Christ.

And he is the One who can pluck up that mulberry bush and hurl it into the sea. Yea, and more than that. He is the One who can pluck up sin, death, and devil themselves and hurl them into the sea. It is not so much that you do such things through your faith, but rather that, through your faith you are placing yourself on the side of Jesus and he is well able to do these wonders.

Stepping back, then, and remembering this morning's two heartrending cries, the answer to both seems to be, Do not fret. To the one who is heartsick about chaos and suffering in the land and who wonders, How long, Lord?, the answer is, Do not fret about evildoers. The Kingdom of God is coming. It is approaching. It is drawing nigh. You will be included in that Kingdom and in this life prepare yourself for that.

And to the one who cries, Increase our faith, again the answer is, "Do not worry about that. There is much in this world that you cannot control, but this much you can control: Whether you are young or old, righteous or wicked, you can start walking with Jesus or renew your good old walk with him. And that is enough, because He is enough, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.