

Proper 26 – 23 Pentecost – Year C – October 31, 2010
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119: 137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10
Susan E. Wilmot

Edward Hays tells the story of an old hermit who receives a visit from a young man. The hermit is sitting outside his cave, enjoying the sun with his dog lying by his feet. The young man asks, “how come some who seek God are zealous in prayer, retreat to the desert for a while, but then give up after a year or two, whereas others, like you, remain faithful to the quest?” The hermit replies, “One day, while my dog and I were sitting outside, a large rabbit ran across the field there. My dog jumped up, and barking loudly, went running after the rabbit, chasing it tirelessly, and with great passion. Other dogs, hearing the barking, quickly joined in. It was quite a sight, a whole pack of dogs racing across the meadow. Gradually, however, the other dogs dropped out of the chase. Some were frustrated by the lack of results, some weary, and some distracted by something else. Only my dog continued to pursue the rabbit vigorously.” The young man is puzzled by the hermit’s story. Perhaps we too are wondering how this little parable answers the question of patience and persistence in faith. Let’s live in with that tension for a few minutes, before we come back to the hermit’s response to the question of why only his dog continued to chase the elusive rabbit.

In today’s reading from the prophet Habakkuk, there is another enduring question of the ages, ‘how come bad things happen to good people?’ Others might see this passage as the persistent mystery of the silence of God, despite the constant prayers of the suffering faithful. Interestingly enough, the name Habakkuk means, “to embrace”. Martin Luther describes Habakkuk as the prophet who “comforts and encourages ... [like one who sits with] a weeping child..., quieting [them] with the assurance that, if God wills conditions will mend.” There is nothing comforting about the opening verses of Habakkuk’s oracle. The prophet’s lament is accusatory in tone and content. He accuses God of looking the other way when there is wrongdoing. In addition, he cries to God over the seeming injustice of ignoring the terrible destructive force of violent transgression against God’s law that has led to so much suffering. The language is full of visual references: seeing, looking, watching, and vision are used multiple times throughout the reading. What the prophet sees and laments, he is confident that God can also see, and in seeing, must rectify. God’s response to the lament comes in the form of a vision for the future, one that is plain enough to read on tablets of stone.

While this prophecy was written in about the seventh century B.C., its enduring message is still relevant today. There are two important aspects to the kind of faithfulness that Habakkuk embodies. The first is that the lament, the cries to God for justice, help, and healing for the suffering, presuppose that God is fully aware of the mess that we are living through, hears the prayers of His people, and will respond with mercy and compassion. Just like the prayers of the Book of Psalms, this prophetic lament is filled with questions, and a demand for God’s response. Yet these questions are not born of doubt, they are born of faith. As one commentator puts it, “We can only ask why God does not run the world better if we are already convinced that God does run the world! ... It is [enough] that we believe that God being God...should make a difference in how the world works” (Dennis Bratcher). Rather like Tevye from *Fiddler On The Roof*, Habakkuk plants himself in a highly visible place, with bold and persistent faith, waiting for God’s answer. Waiting is a part of being a faithful child of God. Most of us have seen at least the highlights of those three hour long football games played in subzero temperatures in places like Minnesota, Green Bay, or even New England in the middle of winter. Beyond the action on the field, the cameras usually pan over to the stands, where the faithful fans are still cheering to the bitter end, sometimes without coats or shirts, even when the score is racked up against the home team. That’s like the kind of loyalty Habakkuk models with his expectant faithfulness. He’s not just waiting to see **if** God responds, but **when** God will answer. There are many times when we might wonder where God is, and why God doesn’t seem to be doing something to help us, heal us or deal with the evil. Yet, as faithful followers of Jesus, we still maintain that God is in control, and that God will redeem all things. God does respond to Habakkuk. In that response, it’s clear that we are always going to

have to wait for “the appointed time... for it will surely come.” After all, God’s timing is always perfect. How we choose to live our lives in the meantime, is the second most important aspect of God’s word for us today.

The English translation of the Hebrew that we heard in this morning’s reading doesn’t quite get to the heart of the more nuanced meaning. At least one alternative that adds depth to our understanding of the phrases, “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them” is “Look at the crooked ones who are not right with God! They are deathly sick.” In other words, a lack of spiritual health quickly becomes manifest in lives that are less than honest and upright in God’s sight. Lives that are even perverse or sinful. Those whose words and deeds miss the mark of obedience to God’s Law or God’s will are frequently described in Scripture as being full of the things that lead to death. Those who are proud and arrogant think they have no need of God. Those who are full of self, conduct their lives accordingly. In self-serving greediness, and idolatrous ambition, those who are far from God feast on the things that lead, not to life, but to death. On the other hand, God tells Habakkuk that “the righteous live by their faith.” Again, we have to be careful with our assumptions about what “faith” means in this context. The Hebrew word means both faith and faithfulness. Our Christian interpretation about our faith in Christ, and God’s graciousness may tend to lead us to think of this prophetic word on faith purely in terms of the gift of salvation. In fact, what Habakkuk is conveying to us is what we now call living our resurrection lives now. In other words, living in faithfulness is faith in action, which is more than just words and deeds; it is akin to faith with attitude. That in turn, is authentic faithfulness to God in Christ Jesus as a way of life, an attitude to living, if you like. Once again, we have another measure of the depth and breadth of our faith. Are we fair-weather friends of God, happy to worship our creator and Lord when things are going well, but quick to fall away when the trials of life come along?

It is also said that “the questions [and complaints we have of God] may be the highest form of praise, because they [show our willingness] to take life under God seriously....” The value of the struggle to live faithfully is reflected in our spiritual growth, and even the gift of a new, or renewed vision of God, and God’s will for our lives. Living the questions means that we are also willing to trust God to sort out all injustices of our world, according to His promise, because ultimately, it is all in God’s control. Remember our puzzled young man and the hermit’s story about his dog? The young man is still confused and says to the hermit, “I don’t get it, what’s the connection between the dogs chasing the rabbit, and the quest for God?” The hermit replies, “Why didn’t all the dogs continue to chase the rabbit? Because they had not all *seen* the rabbit. They were just attracted by the barking, the scent, and commotion. Only my dog saw the rabbit, and once we see the rabbit, we will not give up the chase.” God’s vision for the life of the world is spelled out for us in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. As one of the promises of the New Covenant, it is also written plainly on the tablets of our hearts. A life of faithfulness is a constant quest for closeness with God. In the integrity of faithful living, our attitude always leans towards discerning God’s will, and consequently our words and deeds are a true reflection of faithfulness in action. The message of Habakkuk is that our lives serve as a tablet on which God’s word is engraved. The message is writ large enough to serve as a warning to those intent on pursuing worldly goals instead of focusing on God’s will. It is also a living testament to the hope and truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ, and the promise of salvation for all who come to Him in faith. Love God and live boldly!

Amen.