

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
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October 2, 2022 (Proper 22, Year C)
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Have you ever said anything like that? "God, help me to understand." "God, give me the strength to get THROUGH this."

The FIRST words of the prophet Habakkuk, the very first words he says, chapter 1, verse 1, go like this:

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

Obviously, he was distressed by what he was seeing, by the world around him.

And so are we. We look at the world, we look at our LIVES, and at our CORE we know something's WRONG. This is NOT the way it's supposed to be. We say, "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help?"

Today, we also heard the beginning of a LETTER, a letter to a person who seems to be asking the SAME question, having the same PROBLEM. St. Paul is writing to encourage a young leader in the early Christian church named Timothy. Timothy seems to be having some kind of crisis of faith. We don't know what happened to him, but SOMETHING happened that CHALLENGED his faith.

Now in Paul's letters, it's always important where he begins. And HERE he begins by REMINDING Timothy of his faith and his heritage. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I'm sure, lives in you." I can't think of any OTHER place in Paul's letters where he calls a person's FAMILY by name like that. He's saying, "If you want to know if the promises of your faith are true, just remember the people who GAVE you your faith. In them you could SEE faith, see what it MEANS to a person's life."

You know, there's no such thing as a "self-made Christian." Each of us owes a debt of gratitude to those who have gone before us, and LED us in ways that made Christ REAL for us. They're with us whenever we sing a hymn, or read from scripture, or even pray. They've given us the WORDS, and told us the stories, and taught us the tunes that we use to PRAISE God and GROW in our faith.

I'm reminded of the people that encouraged ME over the years. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for all those saints who put up with me and my questions, and told me the stories of Jesus, who taught me in religion classes in college and in seminary, who guided me when I was confused, and put their arm around me when I wanted to give up.

I'm reminded of my old friend Peter Terry. I went to him when I was in college, when I was really struggling with my faith. I wasn't sure what I believed, or what I was going to do with my life, or what God wanted from me. He gave me a quote from Philippians. He said, "Reggie, 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.'" That verse changed my life.

One time, someone sent me a card anonymously with the poem "Don't Quit" by Edgar A. Guest. It reads,

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit -
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.

Success is failure turned inside out -
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And when you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems afar;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit -
It's when things seem worst, you must not quit.

I cherish that poem. It helped me through some dark times.

I hope that you're reminded of the people who brought YOU here today, the saints who nurtured you in your faith, and to whom you OWE your faith in Christ. Remembering those people, as Paul says, "Guard the good treasure ENTRUSTED to you." "REKINDLE the gift of God that is within you."

And then Paul's letter takes an interesting turn. He says: "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Did you hear that? God gives us a spirit of POWER. We Lutherans aren't used to talking about faith like THAT, but there it is: "power." POWERFUL FAITH.

Most of us look at the problems in this world, and we feel out of control, insignificant, overwhelmed. We feel like there isn't ANYTHING we could do that would make any DIFFERENCE. We feel power-LESS. But Paul says our FAITH gives us a SPIRIT of power. Now that kind of faith DOES make a difference. That kind of faith WORKS in real LIFE: at home, and at school, and at work – even when everything's falling apart. The spirit of power gives something to STAND on.

The confidence of our faith isn't in US and how STRONG our faith is, but in WHOM we believe. Paul wrote: "I know the one in whom I have put my trust." "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light." Because of who JESUS is and what HE'S done for us, we can live with courage. We can have confidence, even in conflict, even in suffering, even in sorrow, and even in death.

When we have faith like that, a POWERFUL faith, then WE make a difference. What we DO and what we SAY make a difference. It MEANS something – to God, to ourselves, and most importantly, to the ones we're helping. "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." THAT'S what our faith is, and that's what our faith does, EVEN a mustard seed faith.

And the beautiful thing is, we don't have to ASK for that kind of faith; we already HAVE it. EVERY one of us ALREADY has it. It was ENTRUSTED to us by those who went before us, and GIVEN to us by God.

Jesus says that if you had a faith as small as a mustard seed you could remove ANY obstacle and cast it aside. Now, we get hung up there. We stop at the "if," and say, "I can't even get rid of the WEEDS in my YARD, much less a TREE. I must NOT have enough faith." But that's not what he MEANS. The WAY Jesus says it means, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed (and I know you DO – SINCE you have that faith), you could say to this tree, 'Be uprooted, and it would obey you.'" You DO have that kind of faith.

You can do things that SEEM impossible. You can do things like forgiving your brother, like helping your neighbor, things that seem impossible. You DO have that kind of faith."

You can say to this car, be moved OFF of that person, and God will move his PEOPLE to move it WITH you. You can say, "Hold on!" to a woman clinging to a tree in a raging flood in the MIDST of a HURRICANE, and God will send his people to link arms WITH you to form a human chain

to swim out INTO that flood to save her.

You see, we were NEVER called to do miracles ALONE; we are called to work WITH God's PEOPLE, ALONGSIDE God's people. How often do we see these incredible rescues when there is a disaster? WE don't move the trees and mountains; GOD does. God sends his PEOPLE. God sends his CHURCH. God sends you and me, and together, WE can do ANYTHING.

"For this reason," Paul writes, "I remind you to REKINDLE the gift of God that is within you through the Holy Spirit." God has given YOU a powerful faith, and now it's time to CLAIM that faith, to REKINDLE that faith. "Guard the good treasure ENTRUSTED to you" and, with YOUR POWERFUL faith, you can do something extraordinary. You CAN DO it, WITH us, with God's PEOPLE. REKINDLE your faith. Amen.