

Proper 22, Year C  
 Oct. 2, 2016  
 St. James, Wheat Ridge  
 The Rev. Rebecca Jones

**Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10**

Debates.

We've all been talking about them this week, haven't we?  
 Who looked presidential and who got off the best lines?  
 Is America really an ugly, dark, dangerous, place?  
 Or is it not?  
 And just how long are we gonna have to wait  
 to find out what's in Donald Trump's tax returns  
 or Hillary Clinton's emails?  
 How long? Are we ever gonna get an answer?

If you've been pondering such questions this week,  
 then maybe you can relate  
 to what the prophet Habakkuk says to us this morning.

We don't often hear from Habakkuk.  
 He was a minor prophet who lived in Jerusalem  
 probably about 600 years before the time of Christ.  
 Habakkuk pops up in the lectionary exactly once every six years.  
 If you miss that Sunday, you could go a lifetime  
 and never hear a sermon on the words of Habakkuk.

And yet, you can make a strong case for considering Habakkuk  
 the most influential prophet of the Old Testament.  
 It's all because of what Habakkuk said about faith.  
 But we'll get to that.

For now, imagine, if you will,  
 that Habakkuk is somehow transported  
 from 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Jerusalem  
 to the spin room at NBC,  
 where Lester Holt asks him to explain  
 just what he saw and heard.

“This is the vision I saw,” Habakkuk tells Lester.  
 “I saw myself complaining to Yahweh!  
 I said, ‘Lord, I’ve been crying and crying for help –  
 and you just ignore me!  
 There’s violence and death in the streets all around me.  
 And you do NOTHING!  
 What we need here is some law and order.  
 But the justice system is rigged  
 and the bad guys are winning!  
 The righteous few are being overrun by the wicked.’

“But then Lester,” Habakkuk continues,  
 “suddenly I saw myself standing witness.  
 I was a lookout in a watch tower.  
 And I was awaiting God’s answer.  
 What could He possibly say to justify his lack of action?  
 He’s got to see that my complaint is justified.  
 He can’t deny that I’m right.”  
 And that’s when he answered me.”

What did he say? Lester presses the prophet.

He said “Write down your vision Habakkuk.  
 Write it clear as day,  
 and write it to last for all time.  
 Post it on the Internet, so it will NEVER disappear.  
 Because you are not the only one who feels lost.  
 Let people know that there still is a vision  
 alive in the world.  
 It’s a vision of the Kingdom of God.  
 And it’s coming.  
 It’s coming in MY appointed time,  
 not when YOU think you need it.  
 It will come at just the right time.  
 You must be patient.  
 Don’t be like the proud who think they know it all.

Don't listen to them.  
Instead, listen to the righteous, who live by faith.  
THAT is where my vision dwells.”

And Lester seems puzzled by this.  
“Who live by faith?” he says.  
“What does *that* mean?”

Again, Lester has asked a very insightful question.  
It's a question with a complicated answer.  
This is an issue theologians have been struggling with for a very long time.

You see, Habakkuk did what God told him to do.  
He wrote down his vision.  
He wrote it down to last forever.  
And he included God's words to him about living by faith.

So about 700 years go by.  
And a guy named Paul picks up and reads Habakkuk's vision.  
You know Paul.  
Paul writes a lot of stuff down too.  
Not visions, but letters.  
Paul writes letters to the churches in Rome, and Galatia,  
and other places.  
In some of those letters, Paul quotes Habakkuk,  
specifically, what Habakkuk says about the righteous living by faith.

But here's the thing.  
Habakkuk wrote his vision in Hebrew.  
Paul wrote his letters in Greek.  
And of course his Greek has now been translated into English,  
just like Habakkuk's Hebrew has been translated into English for our  
benefit.  
But translating from one language to another can be a tricky thing.  
Things do sometimes get lost in translation.

The English translation of Habakkuk that we read this morning  
says “the righteous live by their faith.”  
It's plural. The righteous live by THEIR faith.

But there's another way to read the words of Habakkuk.  
 Grammatically, the Hebrew actually uses the singular,  
 so a more literal reading is "the righteous person will live by HIS faith."  
 Our English translation shifts it to the plural to be more gender inclusive,  
 and normally I applaud that. We SHOULD speak in more inclusive ways.

But the fact is, the original Hebrew is ambiguous  
 about the subject of the pronoun "his."  
 That's the beauty of scripture. It is often ambiguous,  
 which can lead to multiple interpretations.  
 So whose faith are we talking about?  
 Is it the faith of the righteous person?  
 Or is it through someone else's faith that the righteous live?  
 It's not clear. It's not clear to us, and it wasn't clear to Paul.

And so when Paul was writing to the various churches,  
 he used a famous phrase to describe how the righteous are saved.  
 That phrase in Greek is "pistis Christou,"  
 Its meaning is *ambiguous*.  
 It could mean faith IN Christ, or it could mean faith OF Christ.

It's a big question, and a lot rides on the answer.  
 Are we saved because WE have faith in Christ,  
 and therefore it is our faith that saves us?  
 Are we saved through our ability to talk ourselves into believing something?

Or are we saved because of Christ's faith,  
 or more to the point, by Christ's faithfulness?  
 So that it doesn't really matter whether we have a lot of faith or very little  
 faith?  
 OUR faith is not the issue.  
 Maybe we are saved by HIS faith, HIS faithfulness.  
 And maybe the righteous of Habakkuk's time  
 lived not because of their own faith, but because of God's faithfulness.

You could read Paul's letter either way.

And then one day in the early 1500s,  
a German monk by the name of Martin Luther  
was sitting in a tower – just like Habakkuk -  
studying Paul’s letter to the Romans.  
And he came across that part about the righteous and faith.  
And he had an “Aha” moment,  
which led to the Protestant Reformation.  
Didn’t I tell you that for a minor prophet, Habakkuk’s vision  
certainly did influence an awful lot of people.

I know I’ve raised a lot of questions here today.  
And I don’t have the answers for you.  
Like I said, this whole question about faith is complicated.  
Maybe that explains why Jesus’s answer to his disciples’ plea to increase  
their faith  
is so enigmatic.  
Was he chastising them for their lack of faith?  
Or was he encouraging them not to worry about the smallness of their faith?  
Maybe, the point is NOT that they needed more faith.  
Maybe, the point is that faith  
is simply that which enables God  
to work in a person’s life  
in ways that defy ordinary human experience.

That sort of faith really can make a mulberry tree  
uproot itself and fly to the sea.

And that sort of faith can work wonders not just in individual lives,  
but in church’s lives as well.

I know that here at St. James  
you’ve been waiting a long time  
for God to help you grow this church  
back into the vibrant, healthy, growing  
community of faith that you long for it to become.

I know you’ve grown discouraged  
by all it appears you’ve lost.  
The congregation has grown smaller and older  
with each passing year,

and unless God acts soon  
 St. James isn't gonna be around  
 to pass on your faith to the next generation.

You are like Habakkuk,  
 waiting on the watchtower,  
 waiting to see what God will say.  
 How long, Lord, are you gonna make us wait?  
 How long must we cry for help before you listen and respond?

And God's answer to St. James  
 is the same answer that Habakkuk received.  
 God still has a vision  
 for St. James Episcopal Church in Wheat Ridge, Colorado.  
 And if that vision seems to tarry, wait for it.  
 It will come, and it will come at just the right time.

As the Psalmist says,  
 Commit your way to the Lord and put your trust in him,  
 and he will bring it to pass.

I don't know what God has in store for us here at St. James.  
 I don't know how God intends to transform our little parish.  
 But I do know that transformation will happen.  
 It will happen because we live by faith ... and faithfulness.  
 There is OUR faith, and there is Christ's faith living in us.  
 And no matter how small our own faith,  
 no matter how much we fear for the future,  
 no matter how discouraged we may become from time to time,  
 there is another faith,  
 Christ's faith.

And Christ's faith can not only uproot mulberry trees,  
 it can uproot the knottiest problems,  
 it can uproot the stubbornest hearts,  
 it can uproot the most impossible circumstances.  
 So let us continue to guard the good treasure entrusted to us.  
 The Holy Spirit lives within us  
 and we live by faith -  
 A faith that enables God to work in ways

that defy all our past experience.  
Amen.