

Faith from Three Points of View

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Each of our lessons for this morning addresses the issue of faith. The first reading from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, tells how the prophet Habakkuk was lamenting the fact that Israel is not living according to God's law. Actually, this prophet was complaining to God for His lack of action. God answered him with His plan and finishes His response with the words, "The righteous shall live by faith."

In the Epistle reading, St. Paul writes to his disciple and fellow missionary, Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith," and "God, saved us and called us to a holy calling not because of our works but because of his purpose and grace which He gave us . . . and guard the good deposit entrusted to you."

And in our Gospel reading from St. Luke, we hear how the twelve apostles pleaded to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" And there is an exclamation point at the end of that sentence. They really meant that.

So, it seems that the subject for my words this morning should be faith from the point of view of these three lessons.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk is not well-known. He is not mentioned in the New Testament. There are some traditions about him, but these cannot be verified in the Bible. The last chapter of the Book of Habakkuk is a psalm of praise which may have been sung in worship—perhaps Habakkuk was a musician and a Levitical priest.

A tradition from Jewish sources says that Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman who Elisha restored to life (2 Kings 4). The basis for this theory is that Elisha's servant told the woman that she would "embrace" a son (2 Kings 4:16), and Habakkuk's name is similar to the Hebrew word translated "embrace."

A Habakkuk is named in an addendum to the Book of Daniel called Bel and the Dragon in the Apocrypha. However, the Habakkuk in that story

does not match the time of the Habakkuk in the Bible and the stories do not match the Biblical record. They were probably different people.

We do know from the Bible that Habakkuk lived in unfaithful and disobedient times. The facts from the Bible tell us that Habakkuk lived during the reign of Jehoiakim, who was king of Judah from 609 B.C. to 598 B.C. In 2 Kings 23:17, we are told that King Jehoiakim “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The prophet Jeremiah was a contemporary of Habakkuk. Jeremiah described how God’s people had turned from him and were worshipping a goddess named Astarte (or Ishtar). In Jeremiah 7:16-18, Jeremiah describes how whole families participated in making offerings for this “queen of heaven” and other gods. They put idols in the Temple of God and worshipped them. They sacrificed their children to Molech, a fire god. They completely rejected the Lord and His commandments. God was infuriated at their behavior.

Habakkuk, along with Jeremiah, witnessed all these things too. In desperation, he cried out to God, “How long shall I cry to you for help.” He was angry with God because God allowed all this to happen. It appeared to him God was distracted or uninterested or on vacation. God was looking the other way while His people were committing terrible sins. He had been faithful to God and had proclaimed the Word of God in a society that seemed to reject God’s Will and Vision for their lives. These were God’s people, the very people God had saved from the slavery in Egypt. Habakkuk began to wonder if God was who He said He was.

Sound familiar. We live in similar times. The worship of God is replaced by idols in our culture. The acceptance of God’s Law is ignored and viewed as folly. Human life is not valued and protected. Respect and concern for our neighbor as ourselves is abandoned. It seems all of the things that God expects are being ignored. With Habakkuk, we ask, “Why does God let this happen?” With him, we ask, “Where are you God? Have I misplaced my trust in You? I am having trouble maintaining my faith in You.”

God answered Habakkuk, but His answer only added more confusion and questions of faith. God told Habakkuk that he was going to use the Babylonians to make things right in Judah. God was going to allow these

pagan people to invade Judah and bring God's sinful people to repentance. Habakkuk saw the cure as worse than the illness. Why was God going to use these wicked and idolatrous people against His people to bring righteousness? Doesn't this mean that there will be even more death and destruction? Aren't things going to get worse in Judah? Yes. But Habakkuk didn't see the future. God did. In the end, God's plan would be completed. God assured Habakkuk that he needed to wait. The fulfillment of the plan would come at the right time. And then, God capped His assurance in verse 4 of Chapter 4, with the words, "the righteous will live by faith." This is the only time that word "faith" appears in the whole book, but it is the heart of the message of the book. God answered Habakkuk by telling him to keep the faith. God reassured Habakkuk that His vision for life was just, and that at the end of time, there would be judgement.

Faith is the bedrock of our beliefs and doctrine. We have faith in God. Our faith brings us to this place this morning. Our faith causes us to ask God for forgiveness for our sins this morning. Our faith trusts in the Word of God we hear today. Our faith brings us to pray. Our faith causes us to believe that our sins are forgiven when we eat and drink the body and blood of our Savior in, with and under the bread and wine in the Holy Supper. Our faith sustains us throughout the week when we are faced with the evils of this world and trials of our own life. Our faith carries us to the end of our earthly journey and brings us to our heavenly home. Our faith in the grace of God through Christ Jesus is a gift from Jesus when He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts. Our faith is so important, but it is not a visible entity. It only shows in our lives, but it is not something that can be seen or touched.

Some people come to faith through remarkable conversion experiences, like that of the apostle Paul. He was consumed with hatred for Christians, the "people of the way." He was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to rid the synagogue there of those who had come to faith in Jesus. And, God had a plan. Saul/Paul was struck blind and heard the voice of Jesus challenging him to come into the faith to serve Him. And the end result was Paul became a Christian and was responsible for spreading the Christian faith throughout the Gentile world.

Most of us are more like Timothy. We come to faith through waters of Holy Baptism, and we are strengthened in our faith through Word of God, the Sacrament of the Altar, the witness of our family, like Timothy's family, and the ministry of our church family. Our faith is the result of a communal, corporate experience. Although faith is ultimately personal, it is never lived out in isolation. We are surrounded by a community of people who share common beliefs, which serves to uphold and nurture faith in us. For Timothy, that was his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois.

Faith comes to us. We do not act to get it. It said, "Faith is not a self-generated act of affirmation, but the gradual participation in the communal assumptions that surround us." So, that means the values that our community holds dear and embraces as truth soon become the values that are passed on to our children. For example, if the communal assumption that surrounds us is that money is the most important thing in life, we gradually begin to believe that it is, we live by that principle, and we pass that assumption on to our children. Communal assumptions help to shape our lives. We have learned from Jesus in the past weeks that putting our trust in wealth and temporal things is not good or beneficial to our spiritual life.

In the Large Catechism, when Luther explained the first commandment, he stated that we can have faith in many things, but that not all faith leads to redemption. The faith that saves is a faith in the one true God and his redeeming grace in Jesus the Christ. This is why our participation in the life of Christ's church is so important. It is in the church that God's Spirit speaks to our hearts and surrounds us with a community of persons who can nurture and sustain us in true faith. What we hear as we gather for worship and fellowship are the communal assumptions that help shape our lives and the lives of our children.

If this is true, if community assumptions greatly shape our faith, it brings up some interesting questions to ponder. What do you think people see as the assumptions of our community of faith? What characterizes our faith community, into which we invite friends and new members to participate? What inheritance of faith do we wish to pass on to our children? These can be difficult questions, but questions that we need to ask ourselves as we evaluate our lives together.

Few of us would deliberately set up roadblocks to faith development, but we need to remember that our actions often speak louder than our words. For example, we say that we want our youth to grow in faith, but do we set good examples for them? Do they see through our actions the importance of worshipping God on a regular basis, and the ongoing need to learn from the Word of God; the need for prayer outside of this sanctuary; and the blessings of forgiveness and mercy in the real world?

St. Paul stressed to Timothy in the epistle reading that we are saved spiritually by grace and called “to a holy calling.” These inspired Words of God are not directed just to Timothy and Paul. God means them for all of us. We have received our faith, just as Habakkuk and Jeremiah did in Old Testament days and Paul did in New Testament days, for our “holy calling.” You and I were called. And St. Paul writes “not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.” God chose each of us for His purpose and gave us faith in Him to fulfill that purpose for Him in our lives. We may not see the plan yet, just as Habakkuk did not see the plan or Saul/Paul did not at first see the plan, but God has His plan for us. And, Paul warns us in the last verse, verse 14 to “guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” God expects us to be conscientious and careful to keep the faith, the Gospel that we have been given, keeping it secure enough that we can return it in the same condition that it was given to us.

This brings us to our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus had given His disciples some challenging tasks in His teaching to them in the preceding chapters and verses as He was on His way to Jerusalem and the Cross. His parables talked about seeking the lost, guarding against placing trust in wealth and temporal things, mismanagement of the gifts of God, the costs of discipleship, among others. Now, Jesus emphasized the need to be on guard against temptation, to exercise care for those who are young in the faith or new to the faith, and practice constant and continual forgiveness of those who sin against them.

The number and demands of discipleship were so overwhelming to the disciples that they felt they need for greater faith than they had. In effect they said, “Jesus, what you are asking us to do is tough.”

Isn't that often the way we feel? Jesus expects us to follow Him and be obedient just as He was obedient to His Father even to the point of death. He was perfect and completely obedient. We are weak and unable to fulfill all the demands that Jesus puts before us. Oftentimes, we feel the need for greater faith than what we have. When we are tempted, when things good sour, when we can't see the "woods for the trees" in our lives, when we can't tell whether God is with us or against us, we end up complaining to God like Habakkuk. Our faith gets clouded, and we don't see what is right before us. God is working His plan despite our weakness. He is using us no matter how we feel about the strength of our faith.

In fact, that is the problem. Our faith isn't our doing at all. Our faith is from God. It comes by the Holy Spirit. God has chosen us and gives us the faith we need to accomplish His work through us. Jesus reassured His disciples that they would have the faith they needed to accomplish the tasks that He set before them. The same is true for us. We have been given the necessary faith to fulfill the purpose that God has for us in our lives.

Jesus warned His disciples to be faithful servants of God by doing their duty as His servants in faith to His glory. Each of us fulfills God's plan. It is not our plan, but God's. He gives us faith to do His work in fulfilling that plan. Habakkuk came to realize that. St. Paul realized that too. Habakkuk questioned God, but God told him to carry on in faith. God knew that His plan would be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, through the very sinful people to whom Habakkuk was sent. St. Paul, in hindsight, saw how God's plan for his life was fulfilled after his conversion. Jesus' disciples eventually saw how the plan of salvation and faith in Jesus would be their means to establish the Church. Faith led them all to see these things.

Jesus pointed out to His disciples and to us that even the smallest amount of faith can lead to great outcomes. His example was the amount of faith in a tiny mustard seed causing a massive, deep-rooted tree to be moved and planted in the sea.

By even a small amount of faith, we have the power of God to accomplish great things in His name. With even a small amount of faith

in God, those things which seem upside down are turned right side up in our lives by God for His purposes.

This morning, you may be wondering what is wrong in the world, what you are going to do next with a problem or difficult issue you face. You may be wondering where God is and why He hasn't heard you. God hears all of us who come to Him in faith. He gives us the faith we need to face the world and what it throws at us.

Maybe this little story will help show how God works in faith. A pastor at a smalltown church noticed that a kitten had climbed up a tree in his backyard and then was afraid to come down. The pastor tried coaxing the kitten down, even offering a saucer of warm milk, but with no success. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to the tree and used his car to bend the tree down toward the ground, he could reach the kitten. He set about his plan but just as he got the tree bent down near the ground, the rope broke and the tree went "boing" like a catapult, and the kitten went sailing through the air out of sight.

The pastor felt terrible. He walked around his neighborhood asking people if they had seen a little kitten. No one had seen a stray kitten. So the pastor prayed, "Lord, I commit this kitten to your keeping." And then, he went about the business of his day.

A few days later, he met a parishioner at the local grocery store and noticed the parishioner had cat food and kitty litter in his shopping basket. The parishioner had told the pastor he was allergic to cats, so the pastor was curious about the items in the shopping cart. He asked the parishioner, "Why are you buying cat food when you are allergic to cats?" The parishioner replied, Pastor, you are not going to believe this." Then, he told the pastor that his little girl had been begging him for a cat. He had adamantly refused citing his allergy. But, a few days ago the child came and begged again, and so the dad said to her, "Well, if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it." He told the pastor, "I watched my child go out in the yard, get on her knees and pray for a cat." And really, Pastor, you will not believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying through the blue sky, with its paws outstretched and land right on the lawn in front of her." What had

seemed to the pastor to be a bizarre action became a faith-filled moment for a little girl and maybe for an adult father.

God acts by faith. And God expects us to serve Him in faith. He has a plan for our lives, and He expects us to obediently follow where He directs us. It is that simple. Do your duty in faith. Let God worry about the details.

We are truly unworthy as His servants, but by His grace we are. He has chosen us and given us sufficient faith. All we need to do is fulfill His will in humility and gratitude for the honor of serving Him.

When you hear the words of the dismissal today, “Go in peace, serve the Lord.” Do so in faith. Amen.