

Proper 22

Proper 22, 2025 RCL

Given at Ascension Sierra Madre

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 1:1-14

St. Luke 17: 5-10

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today's Gospel takes me back to a time long, long ago in a galaxy far, far way. In that time and place I happened to be looking at a stationary catalogue, you know, like the one that comes from Franklin Covey with calendars, planners, and notepads. In this catalogue was a wire ring notebook designed to help in organizing and managing tasks. On the outside cover in big bold letters were the words: "Dumb Things I Gotta Do."

Dumb things I gotta do. Like what? How about signing up online to receive prescription drugs through the mail? Signing up online for the first time for anything is always a time suck that will cost at least 30 minutes. We hear a lot about efficiency. It sounds good at first until you realize that what efficiency really means is companies off-loading tasks and time to others. We don't park next to a parking meter. We park and walk half a block to a pay station. We are directed to self-check-out in the grocery store, so that not only does the store take its inventory on our time, but we get to unload and then bag the groceries ourselves. And now we get to check in our bags at the airport and print our own luggage tags. Are we thanked for all this DIY? Why no. We're just lucky enough to have only done our duty. You'll have to provide your own affirmation. That's why when I take out the trash, I'm sure to let Tracy know that this was very nice of me because I am a good person; I read the Bible and I go to Church.

All of this was anticipated in another time long, long ago, in another galaxy far, far away, when a teen aged boy being punished by having to paint a fence, persuaded his friends not only into doing the work, but also paying him for the privilege. What began as something you gotta do, morphed into something you get to do. In the end that is the point of today's Scriptures. Today's Scriptures are about moving from something we gotta do, to something we get to do. The movement from we gotta do to we get to do is not done by deception or by offloading on to someone else. Rather it happens by the cloud parting, and our sight that was once obscured, something that happens to all of us from time to time, obscurity arising from futility, discontent, and fatigue, gives way to, as heard in Habakkuk, vision that is true and hastening to its end. It's a vision that when truly grasped becomes not what we have to do, but what we get to do.

In the parish I served for 42 years, at this time I would ask them to pause and consider where we are in relation to the unfolding of the Church Year. The point was and is to look up from the ongoing dumb things we gotta do to see where we've been and where we are going. There is method to the madness. The Church Year is not just about changing colors in Church the way the leaves of trees back East change color with the seasons. So here it goes again.

The Church Year can be divided into two parts. The first part from Advent to Pentecost is about the life of Christ from the anticipation of his arrival to his life, death, resurrection, and his bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The second half of the Church Year is our life in Christ as in how we now live in the light of all

this. And not only that, but how we live in the light of where everything ends in the Parousia when God will be all in all. We are now in the last part of the second half of the Church Year. Last Monday was the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. Because the last part of the Church year begins with St. Michael and All Angels, it's given the name Michaelmas. It looks forward to All Saints and Christ the King which are about how things end. So, this period of Michaelmas raises the question, just how well are we doing in our life in Christ? It also gives an answer: not all that well.

This stands behind all three Scripture readings this morning. We open with the prophet Habakkuk. He's known as one of the "minor" prophets, but what he has to say is anything but minor. The Revised Common Lectionary which replaced the original lectionary in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, cut out almost all the dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Today's reading can sound as though Habakkuk read a story in the newspaper that sounded like something out *The Godfather*: contract murder and judges on the take, and that Habakkuk is having a bad day. This missing part is more like the Palisades and Altadena wildfires with total destruction and loss of life. Habakkuk looks out at the geopolitical movements of his time and sees that Israel is smack dab in the middle between the empire of Assyria to the north, and Egypt to the south. Assyria is on the move. It is coming at Israel like a tsunami. Israel will be totally destroyed by it. And being a prophet and not just a pundit, Habakkuk sees more than just geopolitics. This is not just the natural movement of empires and people like the earth's tectonic plates. It's also about Israel's repudiating its covenant with God to be his own possession. They'd rather be like everyone else. And, if they want to live like everyone else, then what logically follows is that like everyone else, "The strong take what they want and the weak suffer what they must." And for Israel, without God, which of these two are they?

All this leads us right into the heart of the matter. In Habakkuk we hear, "The righteous shall live by his faith." In Timothy we hear, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and in your mother Eunice, and now I'm sure dwells in you." Finally in the Gospel, "the apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. And the Lord said if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could tell a tree to plant itself in the sea and it would."

What does this word "faith" mean? When you hear the word "faith," what comes to mind? Most of the time we use the word "faith" to mean a belief. Faith as belief is holding on to an idea. And that idea held on to, while we may have our reasons for holding on to it, lacks objective proof. It's not like what results from a solution to a math problem. It's not something like litmus paper dipped into a solution and it either turns red or blue. Faith as belief occupies a spectrum between on one hand the possible, and on the other hand, the improbable all the way to the impossible. Faith is certainly about holding tenaciously on to an idea either for good reasons, not objective proof, but good and sound reasons, or for no good reason at all but habit, bias, conformity, wishes, delusions, stubbornness, even fear.

In today's Scriptures we may have heard the word "faith" and thought it means belief but is that what the Scripture readings really said? Did today's Scriptures really talk about ideas and holding on to those ideas no matter what? Or did today's Scriptures talk about taking action and persisting in the action taken, persisting and never stopping and giving up? Just viewing the text on the page reveals that it is the latter. There is another dimension to faith besides belief. The other dimension of faith is being faithful. Habakkuk is given something to do. "Write the vision. Make it plain on tablets." That is write it in such

a way that it cannot be erased. And write it in such a way that one who is in motion can't help but read and consider it. Don't stop doing this. Stand up straight and don't fail, but live by your faithfulness. St. Paul tells Timothy: act out of what God has given you, continue to testify, share in suffering, answer the holy calling, follow the way you have heard from me, guard the truth that has been entrusted to you. From the Gospel, Jesus speaks of plowing, keeping sheep all day long, and when the sun goes down cooking dinner, serving it, and doing the dishes. And yes, take out the trash. All the Scriptures talk about process, action, persistence, and finally virtue which is about character that while beginning as an idea, only comes to be realized not in thinking about it, but acting "as though" until it takes root in us as second nature.

The disciples implore Jesus to "increase our faith!" As practicing Christians are we the only ones who feel shaky in our beliefs? This week in *The Free Press*, Larry Sanger, one of the founders of *Wikipedia*, a website founded on an idealistic mission to provide all the world's information for free and do so democratically, sees it as having been hijacked by ideology. There is a crisis of untrustworthiness that he sees to be the skeleton key to understanding so much of the turbulence and disorder in public life today. Once upon a time there were institutions that were trusted by the public as impartial and reliable sources of information. But now we ask "Do these institutions deserve our trust." In other words, we are a long way from Walter Cronkite ending his nightly newscast with, "And that's the way it is." So no, people of faith are not alone in feeling their faith to be shaky.

The Scriptures call us to faithfulness. But, faithfulness about what? I'm currently reading a book called Sword of Freedom. It was written by the former head of the Mossad, Israel's premier intelligence service. The book is certainly about being faithful to the mission of protecting the people of Israel. Being faithful to that mission means often doing evil things to accomplish good. That is true of every intelligence service in the world. Jesus doesn't do that. Unlike us who must do our best to avoid doing evil, but in the end can only minimize it, Jesus doesn't do evil to accomplish good, Jesus brings good out of evil. We have faith as belief in Jesus who does this, and faithfulness in our participating with him in his doing this.

When we grasp this: who Jesus is and what Jesus does, two things happen. Faith as a mustard seed makes sense because a mustard seed does not stay a mustard seed. And that being the case, our faithfulness can accomplish things that we could never imagine. From this, everything shifts from what I gotta do and becomes what I get to do. I don't have to, but I get to live by my faithfulness. I get to testify. I get to share in the difficulties. I get to share the sound teaching. I get to guard the truth, and fulfilling the tasks at hand. And not only that, we get to be surprised by things never thought possible. And all right down to where we are right now. We don't have to be here, in Church. We get to be here, both now and always.