

Faith Enough to Move Me
A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 3rd, 2010
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him. . . .”

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine tells the story of how his mother Monica prayed ceaselessly for her wayward, corrupt son. Tradition has it that as a young man, Augustine led a thoroughly reckless life of “carousing and debauchery,” as they say, fathering at least one child out of wedlock. His mother prayed passionately that the day would come when her son would be baptized, become a Christian, and turn from his ways. When Augustine decided to leave his home in North Africa for Rome, Monica was absolutely beside herself, knowing that Rome would surely be the end of her son. She begged him not to go. With tears of anguish she prayed and pleaded that somehow God would intervene, but much to her despair there was no divine intervention. Augustine left for Rome.

Years after his conversion to Christianity, Augustine recalled this incident with his mother in the words of a prayer: “But you, O God, taking your own secret counsel and noting the real point to [my mother’s] desire, did not give what she was then asking in order to give her the thing that she had always been asking.” After spending some time in Rome, Augustine went to Milan where he met Bishop Ambrose who then persuaded him to accept the Christian faith and to be baptized. Though his mother had prayed that her son *not go to Rome*, it was in fact *by way of Rome* that God answered Monica’s prayers.

There are times when we look upon the events of our lives and wonder whether or not God sees what we see; and if God does see what we see then we wonder why God does not act as we think God should act. It certainly seems true at times that “We are worthless slaves,” as we hear in the gospel today, “we have done only what we ought to have done”; and furthermore, that God owes us nothing, not even an explanation, not even to our questions about why life is the way it is.

The readings today recognize that there are seasons when faith seems to have vanished well beyond the size of a tiny grain of mustard seed. If you have spent any serious time in the pages of Scripture then you know that they are soaked with the tears of human doubt and suffering, including the Psalms, the Book of Job, the Prophets, the Lamentations of Jeremiah, Jesus’ own prayers, Paul’s many letters, especially Second Corinthians which is sometimes called “the Epistle of Tears.” There is not the least suggestion in the Bible that we should silence our questions, put down our emotions, or resort to artificial optimism or clichés.

Often people will say to me, “Well, I guess it doesn’t do any good to complain. Nobody wants to hear it anyway.” “Well,” I say, “the second part may be true, but with the Biblical writers, I think it does do some good to complain.” These protesting voices of the Bible remind us that we will never understand much about the mysterious ways of God. Some of the suffering we experience is well beyond our understanding, and it has no resolution no matter how much time, money, effort, medication, prayer, or therapy we throw at it. Yet again, in the words of Augustine, “the secrets of heaven and earth still remain hidden from us” and therefore we must “rest patiently in unknowing.”

The prophet Habakkuk, from whom we hear this morning, had very little evidence to support his belief in God. He, too, may have felt that his faith had diminished beyond the size of a mustard seed. Habakkuk prophesied in the final decades leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. He complained that God seemed silent: “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you don’t listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you don’t save?” Finally, worn out from praying, maybe even unable to pray, the prophet wondered if God really cared. Yet, in the face of defeat, he decides to be watchful and to wait: “I will stand at my watch-post . . . I will keep watch to see what

the Lord will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.”

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,” the prophets reflects, “though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” Terrific words of hope in the midst of utter desolation.

Finally, after waiting and waiting and waiting, God gives the prophet an answer in the form of a vision. “The Word of the Lord came to me saying: ‘For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end, and does not lie.’” The vision is like a runner speeding toward the finish line. God’s eternal purpose is not only *moving* toward its goal but, as the prophet would have it, *speeding* swiftly, surely toward its goal.

In the novel *Zorba, the Greek*, Zorba recalls one morning when he discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree. He noticed that a butterfly was trying to emerge from the cocoon. Zorba waited a while, but it seemed to be taking too long. Finally, he decided to help the poor creature along, so he breathed on the butterfly to warm it. Soon he noticed that the butterfly was starting to come out, but to the horror of Zorba its wings were folded back and crumpled. The butterfly struggled but finally died. As Zorba held the little body in his hands he realized the terrible thing that he had done. He had forced the butterfly to come out before its time. Sometime later, Zorba concluded, “We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”

“We should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.”

“If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not delay.”

“Commit your way to the Lord,” writes the Psalmist, “trust in him, and he will act . . . Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him . . .”

There’s a prayer that goes something like this: “O God, I don’t pray for enough *faith to move mountains*. I can get enough dynamite and bulldozers to do that. What I need and ask for, O God, is enough *faith to move me*.”

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, [and you do have such faith,] you could say to this sycamore tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ . . .”

The disciples urge Jesus to “increase our faith.” Jesus was asking them to do things they thought they couldn’t do, like praying for those who persecute you, loving your enemies, giving away all your stuff, forgiving an infinite number of times. And the apostles say, “If we’re going to do all that you’re asking, Lord, we gotta have more faith.” And Jesus says, “You’ve got what it takes already, *since* you have faith the size of a mustard seed.”

I remember a wise pastor saying to me, “As a pastor you’re going to learn all of the frailties, misfortunes, difficulties, sins and darkness of your people. And your going to have to live with it, and sometimes you’re going to be utterly overwhelmed and nearly defeated by all that you know about them. They will disappoint you again and again. They will confuse you, and they will let you down. They will cause you to doubt that you ever had a call to ministry, and that what you’re doing is of no relevance to anyone and complete nonsense. They might even lead you into unbelief.

“Just remember,” he said, “these people, with all their weaknesses, failures, indifference, are still God’s people. They are the ones that God has sent to be the church with you. They are the best that God has to offer, and they are enough.”

“*Since* you have faith the size of a mustard seed.”

This is enough. Whatever little bit of yourself you offer, whether willingly or begrudgingly, will be enough. As Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth.” Whatever little grain of mustard you plant, God has the power to give it growth. “So, don’t worry about having more,” Jesus seems to be saying, “Everybody’s demanding that you have more, give more, pay more, work more, spend more, go more, talk more, believe more. . . more, more, more.” What a dirty, four-lettered word is “more.” I’m sick to death of more.

Maybe Jesus is saying, “Just live the little bit of faith that you already have, because your little bit of faith is the power of God’s Spirit within you,” like the power that rests within the seed.

Someone has said, “You don’t need great faith, you need faith in a great God.”

“For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end, and does not lie’ . . . If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not delay.”