

“The Good Deposit Entrusted to You”

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

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Last week I talked a bit about the Revised Common Lectionary, the cycle of readings that covers a large portion of the Bible over the course of three years. There are four scripture readings appointed for each Sunday. Some weeks – like last week – there is a common theme tying all the readings together. Other weeks – like today – there’s not. Sometimes in my preaching I will try to tie all the scripture passages together, like last week. Other times I will do a deep dive on just one of the passages. And other times – like today – I want to you offer some commentary and reflections on several different passages, despite the fact that they lack a cohesive theme. I say this in advance so that if you find yourself wondering, “What was the point of that sermon today”, well, today, there really isn’t *one* point. There are *several*. Consider it several mini-sermons for the price of one!

First, let me say just a few words about World Communion Sunday. This is a tradition that began at a large Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh, way back in 1933, to promote Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. Within three years it had been adopted by our entire denomination, and by 1940 it was being promoted in a variety of different Christian denominations, in churches around the world. It’s just an opportunity to remember that, despite all our diversity, we are all one in Christ. There is a lot that divides Christians from one another ... whether or not we have a bishop ... how we understand Mary, the mother of Jesus ... how we view the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit ... whether we pray to saints ... whether we venerate icons ... whether we have an altar ... whether we allow artistic representations of the divine ... whether we baptize children, or just adults ... whether we sprinkle or immerse ... how we understand the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper ... how we view science ... how we view the authority of the Bible ... whether we believe that God created the world in seven days 6,000 years ago ... what kind of music we tolerate and prefer (if any at all!) ... how we feel about contemporary hot-button issues, like abortion and homosexuality ... just to name a few. There is a *lot* that divides us; there are reasons why the Christian church has broken up into hundreds of different denominations ... and yet, despite our many differences, and the many different cultures and races and languages that are represented within the Church, we all share a common belief in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. When we gather at the table, *especially* on the first Sunday of October every year, we remember and we celebrate that unity. There is but *one* body. Thanks be to God!

Now, shifting gears, let’s turn to the reading from Habakkuk. Habakkuk was one of the twelve minor prophets; he lived and died some seven centuries before Jesus. We don’t talk about him very often. The book that bears his name is only three short chapters. Today’s passage is about violence, violence that has come about as a result of a perversion of justice. “The law becomes slack, and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes forth perverted.” This is not the way things should be, either then or now. Habakkuk had been praying to God ... so far, it seems, to no avail. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you

'Violence!' and you will not save?" Any of us who fret at the sorry state of the world today can relate to Habakkuk's concerns. Injustice seems to abound; deception and fraud are way too common; people resort to violence far too often. We cry out to God, and is God listening? Does God hear our prayer?

Habakkuk prayed to God ... and God answered his prayer. "The Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets.... There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay." This is immensely good news; God *does* see the injustice in this world; God *does* care when righteous people get surrounded by wicked; God *will* do something when violence and lawlessness reign. Except ... perhaps ... not immediately. "If it seems to tarry, *wait for it*; it will *surely* come." Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. Maybe not even this year. But, in God's own time, there *will* be a reckoning. God is not going to tolerate injustice forever. God *will* act. And the righteous *will* be vindicated.

A similar message is found in today's Psalm text. "Do not be provoked by evildoers; do not be jealous of those who do wrong. For they shall soon wither like the grass, and like the green grass fade away." This psalm acknowledges the reality that evil does sometimes gain the upper hand. Consider, for example, the situation in eastern Ukraine. People have just been forced – often at gunpoint – to "vote" in favor of Russian annexation. Ukrainians keep discovering more Russian atrocities. Russia is mobilizing more troops and making more threats, despite growing protests within Russia and a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of young Russian men. It seems pretty clear that evil has gained the upper hand. The words of this Psalm could not be more relevant. "Do not be provoked by the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes." The Bible is no stranger to demagogues who abuse their power, lie relentlessly to their people, pervert justice, find all sorts of devious ways to "justify" their actions, and cause a tremendous amount of needless human pain and suffering. Dangerous people like that existed back then just as much as they do today. In the midst of that danger, this Psalm offers some words of hope. "Commit your way to the Lord; put your trust in the Lord, and see what God will do.... Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not be provoked; it leads only to evil. For evildoers shall be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord shall possess the land." In other words ... *God* is going to act. God is going to do *something*. What, exactly, I don't know. The Bible is not a crystal ball. These words don't mean the people of Ukraine should just sit back and let whatever happens to them happen. There are very appropriate defensive measures they can take, and have been taking, for months now. What they *can't* do is do to the Russians what the Russians have done to them. "Do not be provoked by evildoers." Anyone, anywhere, who wants to stand up against evil needs to be careful not to commit evil themselves. When evil rears its ugly head, we need to listen for *God's* direction, with the full confidence and hope that, one day, God's justice will *indeed* reign.

Now, shifting gears one final time, I want to direct your attention to the letter from Paul to young Timothy. Paul, of course, was an apostle to the gentiles, to the non-Jewish population of the Roman Empire, though he himself was a Jew. Timothy, his young protégé, was of mixed heritage; his mother was a Jew who had become a Christian, while his father was a Greek. Timothy had grown up in a town in what is now modern Turkey. He had heard about Jesus through Paul's teaching and ministry, and had become an ardent, passionate believer. He became a respected member of the fledgling church in his hometown, and later accompanied Paul on some of his travels, and helped Paul write some of his letters. According to tradition, Timothy ultimately became the first bishop of the church in Ephesus. The reading we have before us this morning is from a letter that appears to have been written by Paul to Timothy during a period of time when Paul was in prison, possibly when he was imprisoned in Rome and awaiting execution. It may contain Paul's final words of wisdom to his beloved student, who was like a son to him. It contains some of the most tender words in the Bible.

“To Timothy, my beloved child.... I am grateful to God ... when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” We know nothing else about Timothy’s mother and grandmother; they, like Timothy, had been converted to the faith through Paul’s teaching. But those two women had made such an impression on Paul that he still remembered them by name, many years later, a thousand miles away. Faith ran strong in that family, as it often does in families; the sincere devotion of a parent can lead to the sincere devotion of his or her children.

But it would seem that Timothy’s faith may have weakened somewhat, perhaps as a result of Paul’s imprisonment. Paul writes, in large part, to give Timothy some encouragement. “I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, in the power of God.” Just because Paul is in prison is no reason for Timothy to lose heart; just because *any* Christian suffers adversity is no reason for *any of us* to lose heart. Paul reminds Timothy of God’s purpose and grace, God’s calling and salvation, and of all the gifts Christ gives us. “For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust.” Paul knows in the depths of his heart that God is worth *trusting*. He has no doubt about that whatsoever. So he advises young Timothy: “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”

There are all sorts of temptations in this world, not the least of which is the temptation to wander from the faith, to give up on God, to abandon the classic, historic teaching of the church, especially when we are suffering. But the message of the Gospel is your *lifeline*. That message is what can bring you an amazing *hope*. “Guard the good deposit entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” The good deposit – the *faith* that lives in you, that utter confidence and hope that, *no matter what*, God is right there with you, guiding you, nurturing you, supporting you, giving you comfort and peace, confident in the knowledge that your life is in trustworthy hands, and that the ultimate fate of this world is also in God’s good hands. Paul might be in prison, but his faith is very much alive, and he’s doing his best to use his own faith to rekindle Timothy’s faith from far away.

Think about what’s going on here. We are bearing witness to a conversation between two people, two strong, committed Christians. One of them is in a bad situation. The other is losing hope. *It’s the one who is in the bad situation who is bringing hope to the one who is not.* Think about that. When you are going through a hard time, a hard enough time that it’s causing other people to worry and fret, *do you have a faith strong enough that you can offer them words of comfort and hope?* Have you internalized the Gospel to such a degree that you can still lift up other people in even the darkest of times? Come on, be honest. Don’t beat yourself up if the answer is “no.” Many Christians aren’t there yet. But Paul was there, very much there, because he had an incredibly solid understanding of all the benefits we get from Christ, a solid understanding that was centered deep in his heart and in the pit of his soul, a solid understanding that had come from many years of study and prayer. If you’re not there yet, if you’re not sure you could offer someone else that much hope and comfort, well, you probably need to spend some more time *internalizing* the Gospel. *Of really getting to know the one in whom you have put your trust.* I can’t do that work for you. You’re going to have to do it yourself....

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