

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
on 10/2/2022, 17 Pentecost, P. 22 C, by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4. Psalm 37:1-10. 2 Timothy 1:1-14. Luke 17:5-10

How open and honest are your conversations with God? I ask this because in today's first reading we heard the daringly honest questions a Hebrew prophet named Habakkuk asked God. He challenged God, asking why God is silent and not helping resolve the horrendous problems going on his generation.

Habakkuk prays, "O Lord how long shall I cry for help, and you don't listen? Or cry to you about the violence in our society and you don't intervene to help and save us? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble constantly? Destruction and violence are before me all the time; strife and contention keep growing. The law becomes slack and justice never seems to prevail."

Wow! Habakkuk could be living in our times with his complaints to God. Habakkuk shows by his example, that we can bring all our most agonizing questions and struggles to God and have a conversation with God about them. In this case, God responded to Habakkuk by putting his questions in a larger context.

God says, "There is still a vision (I have a plan) 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 too long. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith." That word faith does not mean the doctrines or theology we believe. Faith means our deep trust in God and God's love for the whole human race and all of creation.

In today's gospel, the apostles asked Jesus to Increase their faith. Jesus responded, it's not a matter of the size or intensity of what you believe. Just a small mustard seed of genuine trust in God is enough to make a huge difference in your life and in the people and situations around you.

Most of us don't like to hear the words God spoke to Habakkuk. We don't like to wait, because waiting means we are not in control. It is difficult to wait and continue to trust that God really will bring the changes that are needed in our world and in our personal situations. It is difficult to trust that God really will show us what God wants us to be and do in difficult situations. Yet, that was God's promise to Habakkuk.

Of course, the question we immediately ask is: does this approach work? If we wait and trust God, will God eventually show us what God wants us to be and do in the midst of the problems surrounding us...so that God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as in heaven?

Let me tell you a true story of how God worked this way at the end of the 12th century. No one would have imagined that God work through young Francis to make him an example of

what it looks like to follow Jesus and to significantly change the social structure of Europe. Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. He was a party boy, living an entitled, arrogant, self-serving life of pleasure. Things began to change when Francis was wounded and captured in a military battle with a neighboring city. He spent a full year recovering, locked in a jail cell in the victorious city. While he was trapped in the jail, he began to see the foolishness and emptiness of his life and of the society in which he was living. He saw how worthless it is to think that the goal of life is to make more money, wear the best clothes and try to prove by arrogant words or by violence who was the most powerful and most controlling person or business or city or nation.

When he got out of jail and returned home, his old friends invited him to return to joining with them in their self-centered party life, but Francis found it to be an empty life. To his surprise, he was drawn to the poor people on the margins of Assisi. He knew he needed to find a better way to live, but he was not sure how. At that time, the institution of the church and the local clergy were often focused on political power and financial gain. Most clergy did very little to serve and help people experience Jesus as the life-giving center of their lives. So church attendance was very low. Church buildings were often abandoned and in disrepair. Yet Francis found himself going into churches and into the woods around Assisi, trying to connect with God, trying to find a more authentic way to live.

One day he wandered into the church of San Damiano, just outside of Assisi. The building was falling apart, yet Francis came in, kneeled down and began to pray, looking up at the icon cross at the front of the church. (Please find the copy of the San Damiano cross which you received when you came into church.) Let's look at the cross Francis was looking at as he prayed. It's an extraordinary cross. Notice Jesus is dying, nailed to the cross, yet Jesus is also standing, like the risen Christ, with open arms, welcoming all to come to him. Notice his hands and his feet. The blood is not dripping down like the blood of a wounded and dying man. The blood is gushing up like a fountain, giving life to the very people who rejected and crucified him, giving life to all who look to him for help. When he is most helpless and vulnerable, Jesus continues to love, to forgive and help others from the cross.

As Francis was looking at this cross, with all his confusion and questions, he saw the mouth of Jesus begin to move. He heard Jesus say: "Francis, rebuild or renew my church, which as you can see is falling down." This extraordinary moment transformed the life of Francis. He spent the rest of his life looking to the Jesus who spoke to him, trusting Jesus to guide his life. Francis took the words of Jesus literally and began to gather stones and work to rebuild the church of San Damiano. Several times a day he would return to pray before Jesus and this cross, seeking continual guidance and expressing his love, his gratitude and joy, his praise of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

Soon some of his friends came to help him rebuild that church and to join him in his practice of prayerfully looking to Jesus on the cross for guidance. Before long Francis was guided to help his little crew of helpers to live as a community of Jesus followers seeking to give their whole lives to loving, listening for and following the guidance of Jesus.

Eventually, Francis recognized that Christ's call to him was not just the literal call to renew the buildings, but more importantly to renew the spiritual life of the church, renew the people, renew their relationship of love for God and each other and for all their neighbors and all God's creation. Those early Franciscans befriended and cared for the poor and the lepers who were the despised outcasts on the margins of Assisi. They invited people to join them in this humble, simple life of focusing on loving and serving people in need as Jesus did. Jesus was not just a historical figure in the past. They experienced Jesus living with them, guiding them to live as Jesus lived in their moment by moment lives. Following God's guidance, they wandered from town to town singing and joyfully telling people about the love of Jesus who could help everyone discover a better way to live. Their joy was to simply live the Gospel of Jesus, following his guidance moment by moment.

Francis lived in a Feudal society where people were segregated into strict class divisions. The wealthy landowners were at the top, the poor and the lepers were at the bottom. Following the example of Jesus, the Franciscan Order welcomed men and women from all classes of the society to live together in community. They modeled the good things that can happen when, like Jesus, people love and respect and befriend all their neighbors, regardless of class. This was unheard of, and unimaginable. Yet God knew it was the right time to change the injustices of that society. By simply loving all their neighbors as Jesus did, God gradually used that unlikely group of Franciscans to transform the social structure first of Assisi, then of Europe in the direction of God's justice and mercy.

Through Habakkuk and Francis, Jesus says to us at this difficult time in world history and in the Dis-United States of America, our calling is to wait, pray, trust God to guide us in God's way and in God's time. We wait by listening for and then following the guidance and the example of Jesus

Several years ago, this congregation went for two and a half years without a regular priest. Those of us who were here then remember how God guided us to deepen our prayer and our relationship with God, with each other and with our outreach to needy people in this area. We matured as a God guided, lay led congregation.

Now here we are again, without a priest in charge. Jesus is again inviting us to deepen our prayer and our loving trust in God. As Habakkuk, Jesus and Francis have reminded us, God will guide us as we trust God and talk with God about our needs, and, as we act on the guidance Jesus will give us day by day. This week, and at this time in your life, are you eager to seek and follow Jesus, and to keep growing in your love for God, for each other, and for our neighbors in need?

Please take your copy of the San Damiano cross now. Look directly at Jesus. See and feel his love and care for you and for all of us, just as we are. Now, take a deep breath, breathing in Christ's love for you and the whole world...and breathe out, letting go all that is weighing you down. Now in the silence, listen for what Jesus might want to say to you from his

cross. What is Jesus calling you to be and do at this time in your life, to renew this congregation and God's world....

In closing, let us turn to page 833 in the BCP and pray together prayer 62, attributed to St. Francis. This familiar prayer can help and guide us in this new chapter of our life and ministry as a congregation.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.