

Sermon

How Long Shall I Cry?

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Who among us does not want more faith? We come to church or listen to our scripture each week and we hope that there is something we can grasp onto...something that speaks through our doubts, our anxieties, our frustrations with a world that tends to disappoint us with its ugliness and lack of compassion. We come here to listen to words that will inspire us to do more good, to have more hope, to believe despite our disappointments. Today Jesus answers the disciples who beg Jesus to “increase our faith” and in the usual way, the response is not what we expect...Jesus tells them and us...”if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, Be uprooted and planted in the sea...and it would obey you.” Well, thanks to the violence of Hurricane Ian this week, we kind of know what that might look like. Trees, plants, animals, people, homes – were indeed uprooted and planted elsewhere. Turned into piles of sticks and washed away, in some cases homes where generations of people had lived, now gone with no evidence it was ever there.

This commentary from Jesus is a scolding of sorts to the disciples who hang their heads and willingly accept their rebuke from Jesus. If there is one thing we have come to expect from Jesus, it is the constant reminder of how short we fall. But this Sunday morning, a day we celebrate being Christian with our brothers and sisters throughout the world...on this Sunday, when some have experienced the total loss I mentioned from the hurricane, other disasters or perhaps they’ve

experienced the loss of a relationship, loss of their health, loss of a job...when do we get the opportunity to turn the tables and share our disappointment with God.

Yes, I said that – when do we say to God, in moments like these, God...”How Long Shall I Cry?” Habakkuk’s prophecy was directed to a world that, through the eyes of God’s people, must have seemed on the edge of disaster. Even when the northern kingdom had been destroyed in 722 BC, God’s people remained in Judah. However, with another powerful foreign army on the rampage, faithful people like Habakkuk were wondering what God was doing. Hadn’t He given the land to His people? Would He now take it away? Habakkuk’s prayer of faith for the remainder of God’s people in the face of such destruction still stands today as a remarkable witness of true faith and undying hope. Habakkuk provides us one of the most remarkable sections in all of Scripture, as it contains an extended dialogue between Habakkuk and God (Habakkuk 1–2). The prophet initiated this conversation based on his distress about God’s “inaction” in the world. He wanted to see God do something more, particularly in the area of justice for evildoers. The book of Habakkuk pictures a frustrated prophet, much like Jonah, though Habakkuk channeled his frustration into prayers and eventually praise to God, rather than trying to run from the Lord as Jonah did.

When the apostles cried to Jesus, “increase our faith” I don’t think prayers like the commentary we find in Habakkuk is what they had in mind but the truth is, when we are faced with disaster, with loss, grief, or just plain frustration with the violence and injustice of the world and even within our own lives, having those intimate, honest conversations with God are where true faith begins.

When we lose our possessions, our relationships, loved ones, health, jobs, etc through no fault of our own, while these moments are filled with tremendous pain, somehow we are given the strength we need to live through them. Easily? No. Well? Usually not. With some sense of satisfaction? Absolutely.

Jesus goes on to tell the parable about a master and a slave to show them what he means. Now we must keep in mind that slavery during that time was not what we understand slavery to be in more contemporary times. Then it was a way for those who were unable to provide for themselves to trade their labor for food, clothing and a place to live. Over time they were able to work their way out of the life of slave and it was expected that the master would help them do so. Having said that, there was certainly an order to things of which Jesus uses to provide yet another example to the disciples pertaining to faith. He asks, in so many words, does the servant deserve congratulations simply for doing his job? Should she be rewarded for doing what is expected? Of course not. What Jesus describes is a relationship between master and servant that is marked by mutual accountability and expectation. The master expects the servants to perform their duties, and the servants, in turn, expect that when their work is done, they will receive food, shelter and protection.

To question whether we have “enough” faith is to miss the mark. The issue at stake is how we live together. How do we keep forgiving one another over and over? Even those who have transgressed terribly upon us? How do we go on? We do it not because we have superhuman reservoirs of faith stored up but because God gives us what we need to flourish abundantly in faithful community.

While we forgive over and over...we too are forgiven. While we serve others...we are served. While we love others...we are loved. Living into this kind of being is how we can endure the really bad stuff. Because somewhere within ourselves, we know that better days will come because God loves us and cares for us. We also know that God loves us enough to allow us to cry out to him in frustration. To lift up our anger at the violence we live with in this world when our babies are preyed upon. How can we not? When wrong occurs, the fire that is within us to cry for justice, to fight for a better more peaceful world – that fire comes from God.

A community that lives out this sort of faith is not afraid to ask questions or express doubts or show weakness. It is not afraid to value mercy over fairness, or to forgive one another's failings even when patience wears thin.

Faith is not something that we build up and store somewhere so on those bad days, we have something to turn to. That strength to go on, that belief that we can – comes from that mustard seed, that tiny drop of faith we have in that moment. And it comes from the community. When we are weak, they are strong. We come together to learn this, to feel it and to live into that community where we can serve one another, love each other and turn what is wrong into all that is right.

The fact that this book, Habakkuk, was preserved in the Bible is a testament to a loving God who answers us when we call out, when we cry to God. God makes room for human anger – even anger at God. Speaking our anger to God is part of what it means to be righteous.

I challenge you to take a moment now and silently share with God something that worries you, that angers or confuses you about your own life, about our world. Release those thoughts to God and then as you approach our communion table, you can come and be lifted up by the faith around and the faith within in you.

God has made room for your anger – be free knowing that faith is found within these honest conversations. Faith is found in those conversations and is found in hope, trust and is strong even in weakness, not because of what we believe in but the **One** we believe in.

Amen