

**Sermon by The Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.**  
**Pentecost XXIII**  
**October 31, 2010**  
**Grace and Holy Trinity Church**  
**Richmond, Virginia**

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

*The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.*  
*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,*  
*and you will not listen?*  
*Or cry to you "Violence!"*  
*and you will not save?*  
*Why do you make me see wrong-doing*  
*and look at trouble?*  
*Destruction and violence are before me;*  
*strife and contention arise.*  
*So the law becomes slack*  
*and justice never prevails.*  
*The wicked surround the righteous--*  
*therefore judgment comes forth*  
*perverted.*  
*I will stand at my watchpost,*  
*and station myself on the rampart;*  
*I will keep watch to see what he will say to*  
*me,*  
*and what he will answer concerning*  
*my complaint.*  
*Then the LORD answered me and said:*  
*Write the vision;*  
*make it plain on tablets,*  
*so that a runner may read it.*  
*For 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.*  
*Look at the proud!*  
*Their spirit is not right in them,*  
*but the righteous live by their faith.*

***Luke 19:1-10***

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

We have a treat this morning, with our first reading, from the Book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk is a prophet...sometimes referred to as a "minor" prophet. The major prophets, like Isaiah, are so called because the books which bear their name are long. Isaiah filled a whole scroll all by itself. Then there are the "minor" prophets, the so called "Twelve". They are shorter and all fit on one scroll. But the message of Habakkuk is anything but minor.

To get the full meaning, we need to place the book in context. It is hard to pin point the exact historical context of Habakkuk. But most likely he was prophesying in the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus was born. <The kingdom of Judah had become a vassal state of Egypt, then Egypt was defeated by Babylon at the Battle of Carchemesh. But rather than view Judah as an ally, the Babylonians treated Judah as a conquered enemy. So the Judeans revolted and as a

result, Babylon crushed them and carried many of the people away into exile.><sup>1</sup>

The prophet Habakkuk cries out in anguish against all of this: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?...the wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.” (1:1ff NRSV) How could the just and righteous God let this happen?

Part of God’s answer to Habakkuk’s impassioned plea is not included in the portion assigned to be read this morning. But starting at chapter 1 verse 5, the Lord says that he is the one who has sent the Babylonians to Judah.<sup>2</sup> They are agents of God’s judgment because Judah has not served the Lord their God faithfully.

At the same time, the Lord does not give a blanket endorsement to the Babylonians. God uses what they are doing for God’s purposes, but God is also not happy with the Babylonians. God loathes “their capacity for violence and arrogant scoffing against their enemies. Ultimately, they incur guilt by deifying themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

And so, the second part of God’s answer to Habakkuk’s plea comes in the second chapter, in the portion that we read today. It runs like this: “You can be sure of this, write it down, make it large like a billboard...so someone running past at full speed can read it. You can be sure ‘There is still a vision for the appointed time...wait for it.’ The unrighteous will receive judgment., the wicked will fall. In the meantime...and it is this verse that guaranteed an important role for the book of Habakkuk...a verse which Paul quotes in Romans...In the meantime, while things look so totally awful... ‘The righteous will live by their faith.’

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<sup>1</sup> paraphrased from page 1321 of *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, copyright 2003 by Abingdon Press.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* footnote page 1323.

That is to say, the righteous will trust the promises of God. God has promised vindication...in spite of appearances, regardless of timing or anything else, those who are true followers of the Lord will be marked by their trust in these promises, they will live by the light of that faith. That is quite a message, isn’t it?

Now, the prophet Habakkuk was longing for an end to exile, for a return to the land, for peace to come...to Judah...some 2700 years ago.

Christians feel a similar, but different tension and longing. We long for the renewal and recreation of the whole world. This renewal began with Jesus the Messiah and we believe that Messiah will come again to make the whole creation new. In the meantime...the righteous will live by their faith...in the meantime we will live our lives by the lights of the world to come, in spite of appearances on any given day.

In the spirit of Zaccheus, unafraid to make fools of ourselves, we are to climb up the tree, and gaze upon the Lord’s Day, upon the Lord’s promises, in the assurance that we shall be called down, the Lord shall come to our house, we shall embrace salvation. And to paraphrase the words of Luke for today, “We shall all be children of Abraham.”

Zaccheus is an inspiration, of course. It is a great story of redemption. But Abraham is the father of inspiration, the father of faith. God has promised that through Abraham, all the people of the earth would be blessed. God promised that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the sky. And through Christ Jesus that promise is being fulfilled.

But...Abraham’s story didn’t begin obviously or easily, did it? In fact, it looked like he was going to die childless, with no descendants, much less descendants as numerous as the stars. Let me talk just bit about that, but before I do...allow me to take a detour.

I am a bibliophile...I just love books. I have too many of them and am now in the process

of giving books away. When I was in Seminary at Virginia...and please keep the Seminary in your prayers...a week ago, the chapel that had existed for 129 years caught fire and I think it is pretty much a total loss. But when I was at Virginia in the late 1970s the library was going through its stacks and giving away old books for which they had duplicates. I found it irresistible. My wife Katherine eventually had to lay down the law, "No more books can come into the apartment." So, I filled up the car. As I say, I am now giving things away...even as I give things away can't resist new ones.

To wit: This past week, I purchased *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha King James version*. It takes the classic text from the year 1611 and removes numerous deliberate and some accidental changes that have been made to the text over the years.<sup>4</sup> It also lays the text out in a very readable, paragraph style, across the page...not in hard to read columns. It has been fun re-immersing myself in this great translation.

And, because Paul quotes Habakkuk in his letter to the Romans, (okay...I've finished my detour- I am bringing this home!)...at any rate, because Paul uses Habakkuk I explored that letter. And I was struck by this passage from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter where Paul says in the KJV: "Abraham...is the father of us all ...who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken...And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief but was strong in faith, giving glory to God: ... being fully persuaded that, what (God) had promised, he was able to perform."<sup>5</sup>

I just love that! Abraham staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief but was

strong in faith. We see this faith also in Zacchaeus. We see it in Habakkuk. We live it in our own lives.

Wherever you are...live by the lights of the new world, the world that is coming, by what has been promised. If you teach, do it in the service of God's future. If you are in business, be the little bit of leaven that leavens the whole lump. If you are at home, raising children, bring them up in the knowledge of love of the Lord. In your relationships serve Christ in the other person. In the face of conventional wisdom, "That's just the way things are done" stand up for what is right and for what will be. Take time to celebrate beauty and to sing God's praises. Let there be a rebirth of wonder.<sup>6</sup>

When you do these things you proclaim the Lord until he comes again.

The righteous will live by their faith. Stagger not, my friends. What God has promised, God is able to perform. What good news this is!

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<sup>4</sup> From the book jacket.

<sup>5</sup> Page 1737

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<sup>6</sup> cf. the poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti