

A Small and Stubborn Faith

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Luke 17:5-6; Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

What makes one's faith enough? Or good enough?

If I really have faith, should I accept the griefs of my life and of the world without any sense of protest? If I really have faith, should I wake up every morning certain that the day will be full of blessing? Should I be able to throw a mountain into the sea by the power of my belief?

In America especially, we sometimes embrace a pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps version of faith. The one who thinks positive, does enough yoga and meditation, or—if you want to be Christian about it—the one who prays enough and invokes the name of Jesus enough, will be able to pull herself up out of her sorrows and poverty and run forward with optimism and prosperity. You know: *everything happens for a reason! If God brought you to it, he will bring you through it! When God closes a door, he opens a window!*

This vision of faith has many shortcomings; perhaps most obvious is that it just doesn't hold up to real experience. In real life, no matter how much you love Jesus, sick people don't always get better, your team doesn't always come back to win, and a bag of groceries doesn't always show up magically on your porch when you're down on your luck. There are plenty of situations that can't be easily fixed with a praise chorus. Does that mean we don't have enough faith?

As much as Jesus is the center of my life and all my hope—I still have some questions about why people my age die of cancer or depression or freak infections, why school-children have to do active shooter drills, why refugees have their babies stripped away from them. It's not fair. *How long, O Lord!* I want to cry out. ... Does this mean I don't have enough faith?

Today's Scripture readings, fortunately, suggest that faith is more complex. Faith can be small and yet remain powerful. Faith can be full of questions and yet remain faithful.

"How long, O Lord!" the prophet Habakkuk cries out. "Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?" Habakkuk is a prophet whose name most of us don't know how to pronounce (I'll confess I googled it to double check). And yet we should know him better, because his short prophetic book is relevant and relatable. When Habakkuk looks at his people, he sees "violence and destruction," "strife and contention." He sees injustice that springs from neglect of the Torah. He sees the righteous preyed-upon by the wicked. I guess some things haven't changed in the last two thousand five hundred years.

Habakkuk is standing in a line of prophets who lamented and decried the lack of justice in Israel. But unlike many of the prophets, Habakkuk doesn't go to the *people* foretelling an impending judgment or doom. He could take this approach, for the threat of Babylon is on the horizon, and Habakkuk sees it. Instead, Habakkuk goes to God in complaint. "Why are you letting this happen?" he asks God. "Why have you let the violence and corruption grow, why have you let the wicked have their way, why have you let the teaching of your Torah fade?"

It sort of seems like Habakkuk doesn't have much faith. Today's lectionary leaves out a large section of the text, where Habakkuk and God go back and forth. God has an answer to the question, Habakkuk protests that it's not good enough. Habakkuk has more questions than statements of faith. He's even got demands.

"I will stand at my watchpost," he says, "and station myself on the rampart." Habakkuk describes himself as a watcher of the city, a sentinel for his people, except he's not watching for the enemy. He's watching for God. "I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint."

He has questions. He has complaints. And yet he stubbornly refuses to give up. He will wait for God's answer. Because sometimes this is what faith does. Faith means you keep showing up for the wrestling match with God. Faith means you value a relationship enough to have the hard conversations.

Lament is not a threat to God. Lament is, in fact, a part of the life of faith. The Bible is full of the stories of the faithful questioning God—Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Job, Jeremiah, Peter, Martha, and yes, even Jesus on his cross. Lament, I venture to say, is needed. When our faith becomes all about happiness and acceptance, we give up the fight for justice, for wholeness. Walter Brueggemann writes that when we lose lament as a form of faith, we give in to the status quo that protects the powerful.¹ When we listen *only* to stories of forgiving brothers and neglect the stories of angry, mourning mothers, we accept the world as it is and stop pushing for it to be better, more in line with God's vision for full justice and equality.

If we take the Bible's hymn-book, the Psalms, as a model of faith, then nearly half our prayers and half our songs to God would be lament. According to church surveys, nearly zero of our songs and hymns are laments.² Maybe we just prefer that American, positive-thinking faith. Maybe we're not ready to challenge the status quo.

Whatever the reason for our hesitation, Habakkuk shows us what faithful lament can look like. And God shows up in response to Habakkuk's lament. God responds without censure, but with hope. "Write the vision. Make it plain... 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."

In response to lament, God offers hope... and then tells the prophet to get to work! Don't stop with lament, but put faith into action—whatever full-of-questions-and-complaints-and-doubts-and-grief-and-sorrow-faith Habakkuk may have. Whatever full-of questions-and-complaints faith you may have. *Write the vision. Make it plain.* Go tell people, show people, what the world is supposed to be like. That God has not abandoned God's people. That God loves the world. That it would take a lot more than violence to keep God's relentless love from springing forth ever new.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *Psalms: the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 102.

² Marty Duren, "Where Have All the Sad Songs Gone," *Red Letter Christians*, October 15, 2018 (<https://www.redletterchristians.org/where-have-all-the-sad-songs-gone/>).

You can lament, Habakkuk. But once you've had it out...get to work!

I wonder if this is partly what Jesus meant when he told the disciples to have the faith of a mustard seed. They, too, questioned whether they had enough faith. They were listening to his teachings, and seeing the gap between the world they lived in and the world of the vision, and they wondered if their faith was too small. "Increase our faith!" they cried to Jesus. And Jesus said, in essence, "You don't need more faith. You need only the faith of a mustard seed—a tiny seed that spreads and grows. The way of the world tells you that you constantly need more, bigger things—bigger house, bigger job, bigger faith. But in the kingdom of God, you don't need more. You need only to take whatever amount of faith you have, small though it may be, and put it to work. Say to the greatest tree—be moved! And it will be. Say to the greatest powers of injustice—be moved! Say to the world, there is a new vision! And it will be."

So as his disciples, too, are we tasked with this vision. But how do we cast it? How do we write it? How do we make it plain?

I expect, in line with most of Jesus' teaching, that sharing the vision starts with small things like giving a cup of water to whoever comes to your door. Small acts of welcome and hospitality and service. But part of the call is making God's vision so clear that a runner can read it. And as a runner who once in the days before GPS, mis-read my *own handwriting* and took a wrong turn that added nearly three miles to my route...I can personally testify that when God says make it plain, we've got to make it plain. Which might mean, sometimes, that we are called to be more direct than we're comfortable with, or more radical. Like God might want us to literally invite strangers into our home and live with such radical love and hospitality that all who know us see a different way of living. Or—and I know for some Presbyterians this is a big challenge—God might want us to use not only actions but also *actual words* to share God's love with the world. Like, telling a friend or neighbor a story of the hope God has given us.

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This is great, but it's not complete. Because as I worked with this Habakkuk passage this week, I gradually began to wonder if there's another level to the way we must read it.

Because as much as I may resonate with the turbulent, honest, questioning faith of Habakkuk—as much as I may see it as so relevant to my life, our life in this community—there's a major thing that's not the same between me and Habakkuk. He comes from the little country that's always been squished in between all the great empires—Egypt, Assyria, now facing the threat of the newest great empire—Babylon. And I come from a great empire.

I may genuinely question what God is doing in the world. I may very truly cry *how long O Lord* for my own griefs, and for the injustices I see done to my immigrant neighbors. But there's a level of solidarity with those who've been colonized and enslaved and suffering that Habakkuk has, which I have never had. When he cries out about seeing violence and destruction, when he laments that the wicked surround the righteous, he knows that more deeply than I do.

And if Habakkuk and others like him are the type whose laments God receives, the type who are asked to make this vision clear to the world, where does that mean for me? Perhaps I am not always the one called to share the vision. Perhaps on some days, I am also called to be the

runner, the one who reads the message. To *listen* to the voices crying out against violence and injustice. To *listen* to even to voices that unsettle me, make me uncomfortable. After all, the voices that protest our very notion of God can make us uncomfortable.

During seminary, I got the chance to take a preaching class in prison, alongside incarcerated women. Seven seminary students and a professor traveled to the prison each week, walked through a metal detector and across a yard, and entered our very secure classroom where our seven other classmates, who lived there, were waiting. And we learned to preach together. When I first joined the class, I figured the women living at the prison had chosen to take the class simply because they liked learning about God (not, in other words, because they had any real preaching aspirations). I think I subconsciously assumed that I and the other seminary students would be the primary messengers, the one bringing God's word into this space.

But as the weeks went on, I was not the prophet. I was not sent there to write the vision, to make plain the promise of God's hopeful renewal for these women who sometimes felt that day would never come. I was a runner—running through their lives, for a very short time, to hear *their* laments, and their prophecy. Many of them felt a very real sense of calling to ministry. Many of them had wrestled with God through years of trauma, anguished mistakes they'd made, and yet had kept standing on the watchtower, and still were standing there, waiting for God. As they preached the sermons they prepared for class each week, I saw the vision.

I cannot overemphasize this point. These incarcerated women spoke lament but they also spoke the gospel, the vision of God's promise, more clearly than I will ever be able to do. I really and truly believe they are prophets. This is not a statement of modesty or good-feeling, the way we sometimes say after a trip to the soup kitchen that we felt so good inside. These women did not make me feel good. The whole thing was discomfiting, because it threw off my notions of justice and mercy and faith. But it also gave me new eyes for the gospel. I went to that class on a cold November day in 2016 when I was feeling pretty hopeless about the world, and I came home knowing that God's love would shine through, though it may seem to tarry.

This is how faith works in the kingdom of God. Those who question, those who struggle, those who are poor, those who are different, those who are not expected to be great—they are the prophets. They show us with their mustard-seed lives what faith can do.

It's World Communion Sunday today. It's a day when we celebrate that when we come to Christ's table, we come with Christians throughout the world in every place. We feast on bread and wine with Christians from Honduras to Palestine, from state prisons to immigrant detention centers. It's a fitting day to remember that the church in our country is only a small part of the body of Christ, and that we would do well to listen to all those who preach Christ throughout the world—especially the oppressed ones, the small ones, the strange ones. The mustard seeds. For their message can shake the greatest mountains into the sea.