

Habak'kuk 1:1-13,2:1-4
Psalm 37:3-10
2 Timothy 1:1-14
LUKE 17:5-10

Sermon – October 7, 2007

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” It sounds to me like they wanted Jesus to wave his hands over them and order their faith to become stronger without any effort on their part, rather like people who expect their doctor to make them healthy regardless of what they do or don't do themselves. “Doc, (someone might say) you want me to stop smoking, go on a diet and exercise? Can't you just give me a pill instead – or better yet, one shot that will last me the rest of my life?”

Well, no; health doesn't work like that. Neither does faith. Faith is manifested in a dynamic two-way relationship born in response to God's gracious offer of a life-saving and life-transforming relationship with each and every person – and the grateful acceptance of that offer by people and their willingness to grow in the discipline of that relationship.

Now some people may say, “Faith is for wimps. I don't need faith to get through the week.”

Really? The reality is that everyone has faith – the only question is faith in who or what. Anyone who's ever gone on a job interview has to have a certain amount of faith in themselves, in their abilities and potential, and be able to convey that their potential employer can and should have faith in them. If you don't trust and have confidence in yourself or convey that you are trustworthy and dependable, it's going to be hard to get hired for any job you'd actually want.

This applies elsewhere in daily life as well. If “having faith” in a non-religious sense means trust and confidence – especially that someone or some organization has one's well-being as a priority – society as we know it would be impossible without faith. Ever get on an airplane? Doing so requires having faith in all the personnel aboard the plane, plus the maintenance workers, security screeners, baggage handlers, air traffic controllers, ground personnel, other aircraft, even weather forecasters and probably other people I'm not thinking of. Ever have surgery? That requires faith in the surgeon and all other medical personnel, the hospital or clinic itself, all of its suppliers and so on. Something I thought about just before I went under general anesthesia last time! It is an act of faith for parents to send a child to school – and, especially, recently, to college: faith that the people in charge know what they're doing and as well as helping your child learn, will do their best to keep him or her safe.

Daily life requires so much faith in the broad sense that only when that faith is unexpectedly found to be misplaced do we remember how routine it is. Driving across a bridge is an act of faith in those who designed, inspect and maintain it. I suspect people in Minneapolis are painfully conscious of that. Taking a prescription medicine is an act of faith – which is why people are so angry that they may sue when things go badly. Even as routine an action as buying frozen hamburger is an act of faith – and 27 people in eight states with E.coli know all too well the suffering when the meat company and the F.D.A. in whom they have put their faith let them down.

We put our lives and those of the people we love in the hands of others every day. That takes faith in a thousand ways. The question is, do we have a relationship of faith which informs, embraces and shapes **all** of our lives in a holistic way, including all the many smaller faith relationships?

I don't mean merely believing in the existence of God. I can believe in someone or something's existence without that belief influencing my life. For example, I believe that the planet Saturn has moons – not because I've seen them, but because reputable scientific authorities tell me Saturn has moons. Fine. But whether Saturn has moons or not has had, so far at least, a minute impact on my life, even though I think it's very cool to look at those pictures sent back by the space probes. I can believe in the existence of Saturn's moons without it changing my life significantly.

So believing in God's existence may be a start, but as the Bible says in James 2:19, "You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder."

Having faith in God is being in a *relationship* in which we *trust* God at least as much as we trust the pilot on the aircraft we board or the surgeon whose face we see just before we lose consciousness. In both the latter cases our trust can be increased by knowledge and by choice. We may choose an airline or a surgeon based on reputation, recommendations or research, all of which could make us more confident than if we were on an ancient aircraft going to some foreign city served by only one airline flown by a pilot whose credentials never had to be checked by the FAA, or were having emergency surgery in a small town hospital done by whatever surgeon was there at the time.

The author of this morning's Epistle writes, "I *know* the one in whom I have put my trust." I pray that we all may be able to affirm that with equal confidence, either now or at some time in the future.

How can we mere mortal human beings, each of us just one of over six billion people in the third planet from this particular star, among God knows how many planets, circling God knows how many stars, in God knows how many

galaxies, with God knows how many billions of what beings living on them have the *chutzpah* to claim *we* can get to know *God*?

Well, this is possible because God invites each and all of us into a personal relationship with God. Each one of us, and every human being, is a priceless creation of God, and is invited to be raised from the brokenness of our lives and our world by a personal saving relationship with God, manifested most fully through the incarnate Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We do have other options. God has not made loving God compulsory, or even considering God to be God compulsory. For example, we could follow the ancient Babylonians (Chaldeans), who, as the prophet Habak'kuk writes in today's first reading, believe that "their own might is their god."

If you think that's going to work for you as well, you're free to try. You should know, however, that there are no Chaldeans left today. Habak'kuk's heirs, however, are many.

The Bible teaches that ultimate power and authority in the universe *and* the fullness of goodness and love are all united in one eternal person called God, who knows each and all of us profoundly – and loves us anyway. All this means that *ultimately*, the universe is a place of meaning, a place of hope, and a place where we can both grow and be cared for at the ultimate level even if we experience affliction and suffering – from time to time or all the time.

To believe that does indeed take faith. Especially, as Habak'kuk noted, when "the law becomes slack and justice never prevails" and when he was surrounded by "destruction and violence." God gave human beings free will, and sometimes we use it in dreadful ways, but those deeds are the responsibilities of those who did them, not the fault of God.

So, in Habak'kuk's greatest phrase, "the righteous live by their faith." In the midst of difficulties, we can be sustained by our faith if we have a lively, personal relationship with God, sustained and nourished by personal prayer and discerning God's guidance in our lives, by coming to know God more deeply by reading of God's relationship with human beings over the millennia as revealed in the Bible, by experiencing God's presence in the sacraments and in the community of faith, and by seeing God at work in molding the best people we know. And there's a curious thing: the more we believe, the more we see – not the other way around.

So my first point is that everyone has faith – the only question is in who or what, and whether or not they choose to have a living faith relationship with God to shape and nourish their lives in the healthiest and holiest way possible.

My second point is that faith in God is not merely believing that God exists, but having a living relationship of trust in God and two way communication with God, a relationship which, like a muscle, can grow stronger by exercising it.

My final point is that having faith in God and in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord does *not* mean that we will live our lives in a protective bubble.

How many people here have driver's licenses? When you got your license, did the person who passed you on your driving test say, "Now that you're a licensed driver, you're guaranteed to have good weather and good roads whenever you drive?" Of course not.

How many people here have baptismal certificates? When you were baptized, did the person who baptized you say, "Now that you have become a Christian, you're guaranteed to be protected from what Shakespeare called 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'?" I sure hope nobody made such a preposterous promise. God does offer perfect safety and peace to those God invites to heaven, and when the world is transformed into the Kingdom of God the wolf will lie down with the lamb, but in the meantime, "stuff happens" (as if we all didn't know it).

The author of last Thursday's Forward Day By Day reflection put it very well: "What God offers us is strength, not escape. Faith offers us a foundation for withstanding life's storms, not a haven where storms do not happen. The house on rock experiences the same weather as the house on sand. Faithful people are as subject to life's storms as anyone else. If Christianity were a protection plan I doubt that the cross would be our logo."

My we join the apostles in saying, "Lord, increase our faith" – but may we be willing to grow stronger in faith by exercising it, by committing more time to our relationships with the One in whom we put our ultimate trust, including our hopes, our fears and (yes) our doubts, so that, come storms or sunshine, we may say, "I know the one in whom I put my trust."

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