

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Savior and Lord,
Jesus Christ, amen.

Last week I struggled to make the scripture reading relevant to our modern lives. This week I was aware of that same struggle... So I wrestled with Habakkuk and discovered an interesting analogy... Imagine for a moment you are a citizen of Ukraine back before anyone had any idea Russia was going to invade your country. As a follower of Jesus, you notice some things in your society that trouble you — some fast dealing and unjust actions by some of your fellow citizens that take advantage of other people, and they seem to be getting away with it. So, you pray, saying, “Lord, how long are you going to let this go on, with bad people making good people suffer?” To your great surprise God answers you: “They aren’t going to get away with it for long. Vladimir Putin’s troops are coming, and they will disrupt everything.” You are thunderstruck! “Wait, what! Oh no, Lord! Why would you allow a country that is worse than ours to invade us?”

Here’s how relevant this is to our lives. Just substitute Judah for Ukraine and Russia for the Chaldeans of Babylon and you basically have the prophet Habakkuk’s circumstances. He knew some of this fellow Judahites were not living up to the covenant with God and were mistreating others, and he wanted God to intervene, but when God told him the Babylonians were marching against Judah,

Habakkuk was overwhelmed with dismay. The prophet had wanted God to turn up the heat a bit on the hometown Judahite wrongdoers, but not to dump them out of the frying pan and into the fire! As Habakkuk put it to God, “Why would you look at the treacherous or keep silent when the wicked swallows one who is more righteous?” Be careful what you pray for... You just might get it. We who are also followers of Jesus right here in the Miami Valley witness all the corruption and evil all around us as well. The authorities had to cancel holiday parades and celebrations in Dayton and Springfield over the Thanksgiving week because of gunfire and fights breaking out. How long O Lord will you put up with such evil in the world?

As interesting as it is to compare the actions of two tyrannical regimes thousands of years apart, to the current events of today, that’s not what makes this reading relevant to our lives. When the prophet Habakkuk described himself as being stationed on a watchpost, he literally was waiting and watching for the Lord to answer his question. He was waiting for God’s answer as to why he would allow the Babylonian bad guys to overrun the Judahite not-quite-as-bad guys... God does get back to him, but not with an answer. God usually doesn’t explain his actions. He didn’t with Habakkuk and he usually doesn’t explain himself with me either... The Lord does give Habakkuk the assurance that he can continue, even in the face of trouble, and so can we. Once again, that’s some really great advice for

Habakkuk and for those of us who are struggling with all the bad news we hear every day, but that's not the most relevant part of this reading either.

Are you ready to find out the single most relevant part of this scripture is?

The single most important statement is found in God's response to Habakkuk's question is in Chapter 2, verse 4b, where the Lord says: "the righteous live by their faith." God thought this was so important he instructed Habakkuk to write those words down on a tablet. His instructions were to write what God was about to say, "so that a runner may read it." So that a runner could read it??? God wanted his message to be written so plainly and concisely that a person could read the message at a glance — on the run.

In our day and time, actually about 2 months ago, your council voted to form a team to investigate the purchase and installation of an electronic sign. These signs can be really great at broadcasting occasional messages. I've seen studies that show the average driver can only scan road signs for a few seconds. The studies recommend limiting your message to 6 or seven words. There's something to be said for important messages that can be boiled down to just a few words. If nothing else, that makes it possible for more people to remember them and to apply them in the appropriate circumstances in their lives.

Do we have just this exact kind of message here in Chapter 2 verse 4b? I say we certainly do. The answer Habakkuk received from the Lord regarding why God was going to allow a really bad country to invade another not so bad country was this: “the righteous live by their faith.” The most important part of God’s response to Habakkuk’s question was the message that “the righteous live by their faith.” That message is just six words long, right in line with the wisdom of keeping roadside sign messages brief and to the point. At least two well-known “runners” read that sign and changed the course of human history. One is the apostle Paul. For Paul these six words became the foundation for his understanding of justification by faith. Paul quotes God’s message to Habakkuk in both his letters to the Church in Rome and to the Galatians. The other “runner” was Martin Luther, who read Paul’s interpretation of Habakkuk, and used that short message as the foundation for understanding God’s Grace. This understanding of Grace led to the Protestant Reformation.

The words “the righteous live by their faith” are still an expression of the daily walk of every follower of Jesus. In the original Hebrew, the word translated in English as “faith” also carries the meaning of “faithfulness.” In fact, the NRSV Bible marks this word choice with a footnote. Thus, the heart of God’s response to Habakkuk’s question could be translated “the righteous person will live by steadfast endurance” (eight words) or, “the righteous will live by being faithful”

(seven words). In effect, God was telling Habakkuk that during the period when the wicked Babylonians would be in control and God's promise to restore Judah was not yet fulfilled, Habakkuk was to trust God's assurance and rely on God's strength to persevere. This command, shorthanded as "the righteous will live by being faithful" and this was *the* main point of the vision God gave to Habakkuk.

In the meantime, while all followers of the Lord God are waiting for God to fix the mess we made of God's Good Creation, God's statements on the matter is "the righteous will live by being faithful." By relying on God's strength, God's people will persevere. Perseverance is not a popular topic in today's culture. We like instant gratification. We want it all and we want it now! Being persistent means, we're willing to postpone gratification until conditions improve. It carries the meaning that we will have to work hard and overcome adversity in order to continue toward the goal. Our goal is to remain faithful to God no matter how hard life may be or how difficult things are to face. We may have questions about the evil we see on the streets and in our own lives for which there are no easy answers. Sometimes evildoers will come out on top. Even in these times of lawlessness and strife, a steady faithfulness to God, an enduring trust in God's promises, a persevering reliance on God's strength is the way to go through the difficulties of life that cannot be avoided.

The good news is that God has come down to each and every one of us with a message of hope. In Jesus Christ, God's plan of salvation for all mankind was finally about to be revealed. As we wait for the completion of that plan, we can be encouraged by these powerful words from God, continue to live by your faithfulness. When troubles seem to overwhelm and the world appears to be headed in the wrong direction, and when our enemies always seem to get the upper hand, the message from our Living God is to remain faithful.

May God give us the faith to see the world as it is and know that we are part of the healing and redeeming of all things. May your Advent waiting be full of awe, mystery, and joy. Amen.