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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10
Grandmother and mother

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text comes from our Second Lesson, from St. Paul's Second Epistle to his young colleague Timothy. St. Paul writes this:

⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your *grandmother* Lois and your *mother* Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you. (2 Timothy 1:5-6, RSV)

By God's grace, such a thing could be said about some of us here today. I was blessed, for example, with a Christian grandmother and mother, and so St. Paul could have written to me:

⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lydie Bilbrough and your mother Rachel, and now, I am sure, dwells in you.

And for my wife Carol:

...a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Margaret and your mother Betty, and now, I am sure, dwells in you.

Such a blessing is not to be taken lightly, in my opinion. Many of us have been the earnest subject of many a prayer by mother or father, grandmother or grandfather. How many prayers went up for us, how many tears were perhaps shed for us, all in intense hope that we would draw closer to Jesus and walk better with him!

When I recall my mother, Rachel, my strongest image is a warm and happy one: waking up in the morning, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, and heading out to the kitchen to find my mother reading her Bible at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee to the side. Dad was usually already off to work, but he too was a man of the Good Book. That is an evening image for me of Dad: Dad reading his Bible, Dad praying.

For those of us who had such parents, I do believe we were blessed. We had living examples of faith right before our eyes. We had words of faith sounding forth in prayer and in Christian counsel. For us, I think it was easy to love the Christ our parents so clearly loved.

But not everyone is blessed with such parents. That is why it is so important that Timothy should rekindle his ministry. Much has been entrusted to Timothy and much is asked. St. Paul wants the young man to follow his example in laboring with all his heart that there should be faith on earth.

That phrase there “that there should be faith on earth” comes from a haunting question from our Lord Jesus. In St. Luke, Chapter 18, Jesus raises the question of faith:

...when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18:8, NRSV)

If St. Paul has anything to do with it, there will be faith on earth, for he means to motivate that young preacher, Timothy, to carry on for him. St. Paul himself is near his life’s end. He knows that. He has fought his good fight. He has established congregations, encouraged them, rebuked them when necessary, done what he could for the cause of faith. Now he aims to rekindle the faith of Timothy, that Timothy should so labor that this old earth is not left bereft of faith.

Today’s Bible Lessons all concern faith. Our First Lesson, from Habakkuk, sounds forth the great tone of faith in a passage that was cherished by both St. Paul and the Reformers:

⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, *but the righteous live by their faith.* (Habakkuk 2:4, NRSV)

Our Epistle Lesson finds St. Paul urging the young pastor Timothy to rekindle his faith and ministry. After reminding Timothy of the faith of his grandmother and mother, the apostle writes this:

⁶Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; (2 Timothy 1:5-6, RSV)

And our Gospel Lesson finds the disciples asking for an increase of faith:

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5, RSV)

In this sermon I hope to explain why it is such an urgent matter to St. Paul that he get Timothy back on track. Faith on earth is at stake. And this earth needs faith.

Let me begin with the reading from Habakkuk. He was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, which means, alas, that he witnessed the same downfall of Judah that Jeremiah witnessed and wept over. The *New Jerusalem Bible*, in its essay introducing the prophets, makes an interesting claim about Habakkuk. It goes thus:

Habakkuk sounds a note new to the teaching of the prophets; he has the temerity to demand an account from God of his ordering of the world. Judah indeed has sinned, but why should a God of holiness, 1:12, with eyes too pure to look at evil, 1:13, choose the savage Chaldaeans to wreak his vengeance? Why must the bad be punished by the worse? Why should he appear to strengthen the arm of injustice? *This is the problem of evil posed at international level* and Habakkuk's dismay is felt by many people today.

When Habakkuk questions the Lord as to why he is permitting the Chaldaeans to torment the people of Israel, the Lord answers that he is using them as his instrument to punish Judah for her sins. Listen to the Lord's answer to Habakkuk and to the Lord's description of those "savage Chaldaeans."

⁶For look, I am stirring up the Chaldaeans,
that fierce and fiery nation
who march miles across country
to seize the homes of others.

⁷They are dreadful and awesome,
a law and authority to themselves.
⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at night;
their horsemen gallop on,
their horsemen advance from afar,
swooping like an eagle anxious to feed.

⁹They are all bent on violence,
their faces scorching like an east wind;
they scoop up prisoners like sand. (Habakkuk 1:6-9, NJB)

But Habakkuk is not content with this divine answer. The Lord might well punish his people, but why in this way, why in a way that not rocks the people so? Habakkuk argues that the Lord's arrangement of international politics is not worthy of his goodness. It is a bold challenge to the Lord. Habakkuk says this:

¹³Your eyes are too pure to rest on evil,
you cannot look on at oppression.
Why do you look on at those who play the traitor,
why say nothing while the wicked swallows someone more upright than
himself?
¹⁴Why treat people like fish of the sea,
like gliding creatures who have no leader?
¹⁵They haul them all up on their hook,

they catch them in their net,
they sweep them up in their dragnet
and then make merry and rejoice. (Habakkuk 1:13-15, NJB)

Now, the stage is set for the Lord's answer. It is an answer that speaks of faith. The Lord speaks of a vision. He has a goal in mind. We know from other passages in the Bible that he is speaking of his kingdom, when the wolf will live in peace with the lamb, where there will be no more dying or suffering, where God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes, and where we will all be gathered under the good and glorious reign of Christ the King.

That vision will be fulfilled at its appointed time. In the meanwhile, the Lord says, the righteous shall live by faith:

²Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For 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. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, *but the righteous live by their faith.*

Note that word "live." The righteous *live* by their faith. They do not simply trudge onward, glassy-eyed, trying to put out of their mind all of this world's troubles, narrowing down their efforts simply to accumulating as many good things as they can in their three-score plus ten or even four-score years, and then quietly die. No, the righteous *live* by their faith. Their faith permits them to see beyond this world's horizon to a better world coming, and therefore to live and love with some hope that the fight to do good, not just receive it, but do it, is worthwhile.

This world is just too hard, in my opinion, without faith. Or a better way to put it is that in this world, with its sorrows and the continual shadow of death, to our surprise there is some reason for hope. Wars and diseases and all kinds of setbacks assault us. And they would continue to do so even if there were no good God. But there happens to be a good God, and it is almost an act of cruelty to not let people have some hope in this world based on that good God. That is why it is important that there should be faith on earth.

The other day, Carol read from Job to her folks in the nursing home. It was the appointed reading for the day, and so Carol read it aloud. It was a hard reading, one in which Job wishes he had never been born. But it was the appointed reading, and so Carol read it:

¹After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day.

²And Job spake, and said,

³Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

⁴Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it.

⁵Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. (Job 3:1-5, KJV)

And the way it goes in nursing homes is that the people sometimes enter into dialog with the preacher. Yes, these frail elderly folks had some sense of how Job felt. God willing, they were not so despondent that they wish they had never been born, but they knew that life can be tough. They also knew that their Lord Jesus had known abandonment on the Cross, so that he cried out, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

The Triune God has his purposes. He has a vision. Our sin always resists his vision and throws havoc into it, but he will not give up. He is determined to bring us a better day. And that is worth knowing. That is why the preaching of faith is important. Our faith comforts people with that best form of comfort: the truth!

Of course, Jesus is right when he says that even a little bit of faith is enough to do great things, even to say to yon deep-rooted sycamine tree:

‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. (Luke 17:6, RSV)

Faith is like a porthole in a dungeon. If you draw near to it, it functions as well as a picture window to let you see a better world. You might be dwelling for now in a dark, damp cell, lonely and afflicted, but look through that window, big or little, and you will see a world of sun and birds and grass and freedom. So, it is with faith. Either you believe that Jesus of Nazareth is risen or you do not. If you do believe, then draw closer to that faith, and this world will look better to you. If you do not believe it, I hope that you soon will, because you deserve to know the truth, especially when the truth is so encouraging and so strengthening in life.

The truth is that Jesus lives, therefore fret not overmuch. Rather live in faith in the Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.