

“God Blessed You with Faith”

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Most of you likely have heard and remember the 1987 hit song by George Michael titled, "Faith." In this song, over, and over, and over again, the lyrics of the refrain express, "Yes, I gotta have faith. Oh, I gotta have faith. Because I gotta have faith." But the faith that is echoed here is not equal to the faith we discuss in our text this morning. It's not a song that is meant to evoke ideas of the faith of Abraham, or the faith which Paul commends his friend Timothy for in our Epistle lesson. Faith, though, can take many forms in society today. Politicians speak of faith in government. Teachers and doctors speak about faith in science. And, quite often in today's world, when we witness something good and heartwarming, we hear the phrase, "That sure does restore my faith in humanity," which flat out ignores the reality of the sinful nature which corrupts all of mankind.

But what faith is it that the prophet Habakkuk speaks of in our text this morning? A superficial platitude which garners good feelings and a sense of control? An activity that I must do to accomplish a goal? Or, as many will interpret, is it a work we must complete to be worthy of salvation, telling ourselves over, and over, and over again, "Yes, I gotta have faith. Oh, I gotta have faith. Because I gotta have faith." In the face of this sinful world and its evil forces that seek to drive us away from our Lord, a true understanding of what it means to have faith is paramount. The Christian cannot place their faith in the things of the world and hope to be counted among the sheep. Only faith in Christ and His atonement on the cross will bring them the hope that they seek.

The world definition of faith, as is the case in our society today, is frequently defined by one's own personal definition of their beliefs. Founded in their worldly understandings and machinations, they present themselves as "believers" who have faith in "some higher power," playing to this more and more common approach to faith that someone is "spiritual" but not religious. In our text this morning, the prophet Habakkuk is crying out, complaining to the Lord that the people of Judah are doing much the same thing. They "have faith," but the evil that permeates their lives is evidence that it is not true faith. Hear what the prophet says in chapter 1:4, "So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted." The wickedness of Judah has made God's law an afterthought. It is as if God's Law is paralyzed by the evil thoughts and actions of the people. The few righteous people among the nation are surrounded by the wicked, and those wicked people

proclaim a perverted justice for their actions. Maybe a good way to think about this is that they said they're sorry, but they had their fingers crossed, so it didn't count. Their faith is in themselves and in their own self-preservation.

Then there is the ever-increasing persecution from the world that says we can have faith in anything we want, as long as that faith is not in the one true God, the creator and redeemer of all things. If we want to throw ourselves at the mercy of astrology and horoscopes, they would tell us we're so wise and brave for turning to the universe for answers. But, if we throw ourselves at the mercy of a vengeful, yet forgiving God, we are cast aside as bigots and hate mongers who deserve everything we get as they berate and belittle us. It should not surprise any of you that in this sinful world, the Gospel of Christ is hated and pushed away. In Luke 6:22-23, the Lord tells us in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets." The persecution we face in this society is nothing new. It goes back all the way to the time of the prophets, and, when we get to the real heart of the issue, all the way back to the Garden and the temptation by the serpent, for it is Satan and his evil that drives it. But as the Lord says, rejoice in that day when persecutions come on account of your faith, because the reward for your faith is not in this world.

Then there are those who believe that their own good works create and build their faith in God. Through their own works in the world, and by them opening their hearts to Jesus to allow Him entry, they will have faith that is theirs to cultivate and grow. These people would have no hard time standing up and singing loudly, "Yes, I gotta have faith. Oh, I gotta have faith. Because I gotta have faith." These Christians believe that everything in their life is based on how much faith they have—that if they just work hard enough, then they will have a full heart that is capable of accepting Jesus. The problem with relying on our feelings and our hearts is told to us in Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" A faith that is built on the heart and the feelings it provides is a faith like the house built on the sand, one that will crumble and fall at the slightest tempest. And when we have put everything on that shaky foundation, the world uses the people closest to us to open the door for Satan, that he might take advantage of that weakness of faith. The people around us that we consider Christian brothers (even though we may not agree on every matter of doctrine) will become stumbling blocks for our own faith if we fail to remember the truth of what it means to "live by faith." (Hab 2:4).

The Apostle Paul references our text three times in his epistles, and I would like to focus for a moment on two of those instances. The first comes from Romans 1:17, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The Roman people to whom Paul writes are getting a crash course in what it means to have faith. The example given here where Paul says, “The righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,” is one that confounds many. How can something be from faith, and for faith at the same time, or as we have discussed in Bible study, it is “out of faith, into faith.” God’s almighty power and righteousness is revealed to us from and by the faith that is given to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. That righteousness which is revealed to us then gives us strength for our faith that God has blessed us with. Revealed to us out of faith, for our faith. A circle in which we must continually find ourselves at the foot of the cross to ask the Lord’s blessings, which He provides to us through His unmerited grace and mercy. Without the grace of God granting us our faith, we have nothing. We become simply poor, miserable sinners, lost in a dying world with no revealing light to guide us on our way.

The second reference to our text comes in Galatians 3:11-12, “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’” Faith, unlike the Law, is not something that we do. The one who bases their faith on the Law will live by the Law, and subsequently, be condemned by that law. Faith is a gift from God for the salvation of our souls. In addressing the Galatians, who find themselves turning toward the Law-based faith of the Judaizers, Paul makes this abundantly clear. The justification promised to us in Christ’s atonement on the cross and confirmed in His resurrection, is not contingent upon how well we keep the Law. The Lord of heaven and earth sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to ensure that salvation for us by fulfilling the Law as a perfect man, suffering and dying to fulfill God’s salvific purpose. And, because of that sacrifice, we “live by faith,” as it says in our text. It is the faith that lives in us, given to us by the Holy Spirit in our baptisms that makes us able to live by faith, for, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

And because it is Christ who lives in us, we do good works out of love for God and our neighbor. We live out our faith in how we care for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We read in the Lutheran Confessions from the Smalcald Articles, “Such faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sins are followed by good works... We say, besides, that if good works do not follow, the faith is false and not true.” The Lord, abundant in

His grace and mercy, blessed us with the gift of faith in Jesus Christ through the means of grace delivered to us by the Holy Spirit. In response to that abundance of grace and mercy, we must, as Christian believers in justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone, live by our faith and act according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must love God and love our neighbor, yet always having the understanding that in so doing, we are not creating or bettering our faith in God when we do so, and trusting in the reality that our love flows from that which is given to us by God Himself.

Living by faith is a gift, just as is the faith itself that is given. Being alive in Christ, through the grace of our baptisms, we cling to the truth of our faith and spread that good news to the lost. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus talks about “faith like a grain of mustard seed.” Being in possession of even the smallest amount of true faith, gives one the power to tell the mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” as Christ tells the Apostles in Luke 17:6. And when the fruits of faith are done, and all that Christ has commanded us to do has been completed, the Lord tells us that we shall say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.” It is our responsibility to use the faith we have to the glory of God and the betterment of His Kingdom. But we cannot insert that responsibility into the reality that our faith is not ours by virtue of those duties being fulfilled. Always, we must remember that living by faith is an understanding that it is by the grace of God alone that we have the true faith, and everything that flows from it is nothing more than doing what is our duty.

And what does it mean to have true faith? True faith is trust. Regardless of our human feelings, it is trust in the promise of God that He will deliver us from our sins, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of salvation. Jesus says in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” We come to the Father through faith in His Son, our crucified and risen Savior. We receive that faith from the Holy Spirit as a gift from God in our baptisms, in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and in the hearing of God’s Word. Through these means of grace, God delivers eternal life and salvation to all who believe in Him through the redemptive work of our savior, Jesus Christ. So, while the world sings along with George Michael’s hit song “Faith,” growing ever stronger in their own self-righteousness, we sing our own version of that song. Because of Jesus Christ and His righteousness, imputed to us through faith, according to His death and resurrection, we don’t hope in the view of “I gotta have faith,” to get to the end result of our faith. We rest assuredly in the loving arms of our Father, singing with the whole host of heaven, now and for all eternity. Though maybe not as “catchy,” we welcome the eternal salvific truth of the words we sang a moment ago:

In faith, Lord, let me serve Thee;
Though persecution, grief and pain
Should seek to overwhelm me,
Let me a steadfast trust retain;
And then at my departure
Take Thou me home to Thee
And let me there inherit
All thou hast promised me.
In life and death, Lord, keep me
Until Thy heaven I gain,
Where I by Thy great mercy
The end of faith attain. Amen.