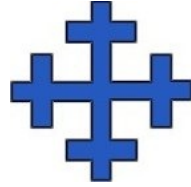


# St Mary of the Harbor

## Provincetown, Massachusetts



October 6, 2019

Pentecost 17 C Proper 22

The Reverend Terry R. Pannell

### ***Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4***

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, 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. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them.*

### ***Luke 17:5-6***

*The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.*



## Changing the Landscape

Most churchgoers do not recognize the name of the author of this morning's Old Testament reading, although his name is quite memorable. Over the years, I have heard it pronounced several ways. English speakers generally say *hah-back-kuk*. And then you have the Hebrew pronunciation where the b's are pronounced as v's. So Habakkuk becomes *have-ah-kook*, as in what family doesn't have a kook in it?

Regardless of how you pronounce the prophet's name, it's too bad he is afforded only eight measly verses in the church's three year Sunday lectionary. If the legend is true, one would think a fellow raised from the dead when he was a boy by the legendary prophet Elisha would deserve to be mentioned more frequently in churches on Sundays.<sup>1</sup> While he has been overshadowed by one of his contemporaries, another prophet named Jeremiah, Habakkuk warrants our attention because he raises a very important question that most of us have pondered at some point, either in our hearts or on our lips, as the prayer goes; namely, how can anyone believe in God when you live in a corrupt, unjust and violent world that never seems to change?

The examples in Habakkuk's lament sound familiar to modern ears. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous--therefore judgment comes forth perverted."

Discouraging words if there ever were any. It is no secret that many people are discouraged by what they see in going on in this country. You look around and wonder if

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 4: 8-37

God is asleep at the wheel. But then, that does not correspond to the God of justice and mercy the Bible talks about. So it must be that we don't have enough faith, that familiar fallback for those who need to rationalize why God seems so unresponsive to our laments. The remedy then, is to have more faith. Right? I mean, who hasn't imagined what life would be like to have more faith? Evidently, those first followers of Jesus did.

When it comes down to it, I don't think we are really all that different from them. How many times have you said to yourself, if I only had more faith, my life would be different. I would not worry so much. I wouldn't be so pessimistic about the future.

If only I had more faith, I would be more content. I would be more generous and caring. If only I had more faith, I could forgive the people who have wronged me and get on with life. If only I had more faith....well, you fill in the blank.

If you listen closely, those "if only" statements sound more like an excuses than requests. Of course, there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting to increase one's faith. The question is, what would you do with it if God granted your request?

While he doesn't come right out and say it, I have a feeling that is what Jesus was getting at when he told his disciples that if they had "faith the size of a mustard seed," they could say to a "mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey" them. In his version of the same story, Matthew substitutes a mountain for the mulberry tree but you get the gist of what is being said.

It seems to me that Jesus is suggesting that the problem isn't about having enough faith or that the potency of one's faith is proportional to its quantity. Think about it. When you look at what is going on in the world around you, what do you see? Does it overwhelm you at times? Do the problems seem insurmountable?

What if the answer to our laments has nothing to do with having *enough* faith? As if anyone can really measure faith. Instead, what if we looked at things from another perspective, something Jesus tried to get his disciples to do. What if we stopped focusing on what is and started to focus on what can be? What if, instead of living in a world where you cannot see the forest for the trees, you could change the landscape?

That is what faith does. It changes the landscape within us so that we can change the landscape around us. The truth is though, nothing around us will change until the landscape within us changes. And for that happen, well, that takes an act of faith.

Habakkuk lamented that God wasn't doing anything about the injustice and violence he saw around him. More than 600 years later, Jesus' disciples asked him to supersize their faith. But what if it is not the amount of faith but the depth of it that matters?

You've hear the phrase a mile wide and inch deep? Does that describe your life? It does mine, far more often than I would like to admit. If I am honest, I am better at wishing the world would change for the better than I am at working to make it happen. It is a bit like

gardening. I like the idea of having a beautiful garden more than the idea of getting my hands dirty doing the work that is needed to make it a reality.

If I understand Jesus correctly, I'm pretty sure that when it comes to faith, it is not what you see on the surface that can make a difference. It is what we find deep within ourselves that can change the world. If Jesus was right and who are we to argue with the Messiah, you need only the faith the size of a mere mustard seed to change the lay of the land. So just imagine how a simple act of kindness or a word spoken in love can change someone's life? And maybe, just maybe even the world.