

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 6, 2019

“Lesson Learned”

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; 17 Pentecost C (Proper 22)
Note: Preached only at 9:00 service; Animal Blessing at 11:15 with its own sermon.

Perhaps the hardest lesson to learn about the life of faith... is patience.

2,700 years ago the prophet Habakkuk lived... in a time of great violence and political instability. His nation, the ancient people of Judah, was squeezed between global forces they could not control: the invading Egyptians on the one side and the massive imperial power of the Babylonians and their armies on the other. And Habakkuk's nation rebelled against them both. They believed that God was on their side, that the covenants and promises God made with their ancestors guaranteed their safety, despite the fact that for generations his people had neglected God and shown a real lack of concern for their faith. And the ensuing crush of violence and devastation that came upon them were too much to bear. The Babylonians tore his nation to the ground. And Habakkuk cries out to God: “Violence!” And he asks the question that so many people have asked throughout the ages: “Why?” *Why would God let this sort of thing happen to us? Why would God look on the treacherous, and be silent when the wicked swallow up the righteous?*

Well, for me, Habakkuk is a reminder that what is happening in the world today is not new. The headlines seem to have changed little over the millennia. I do not mean to belittle the experiences of devastation and grief that people are experiencing in our own day, but the world has known incredible violence before the present time, and likely it will again. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel says history is made up of “Wars, victories, and wars. So many dead. So many tears. So little regret. So many fears.” But are we to believe that history is only the sum total of our wars and treachery? Is there no other power at work in Creation?

Of course, there is. What if we were to see history like the prophets do?... that human history is really the story of the salvation of humankind through the patient, continuous acts and invitations of God. Despite our stubborn unwillingness to repent of our pride and power, God continues to invite us to live. But why then does God allow all the violence and injustice? Well, I don't think God does *allow* them; it is people who perpetrate such things. Are we not “allowed” also to show compassion and kindness to one another? To tell the truth? To act with humility? To do what is right? We've been given a choice. The English philosopher G. K. Chesterton once said: *“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”* No wonder the disciples plead with Jesus in today's gospel: “Increase our faith!” How hard this is: To rejoice... though despair or

violence be all around us. Or illness, or unemployment, or doubts, or difficulties, or sadness. The prophet would teach us is that no matter what befalls us, God continues to be for us.

And so we arrive again at the hardest lesson of all: patience. Because the world is not yet right. But despite our brokenness, despite the struggle, God tells Habakkuk to remind us, "...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..."

An article several years ago in Time Magazine featured another prophet, a prophet from our own time, and I gather that nearly all of us have heard of him. Desmond Tutu, a bishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa, was reflecting upon all he has known, all he has seen, all the headlines he has read ---the turbulent and murderous days of Apartheid, the suffering of millions under the hands of thoughtless and violent dictators, the wars raging throughout the world--- and what Tutu says is this: "[Here is] the chief lesson I have learned: The texture of our universe is one where there is no question at all but that good and laughter and justice will prevail. In the end," says Tutu, "the perpetrators of injustice or oppression, the ones who strut the stage of the world often seemingly unbeatable --- there is no doubt at all that they will bite the dust." And then he laughs and says, "Wonderful! Wonderful!"

At the end of his book of prophecy, after all the questions and struggles, Habakkuk concludes his book of prophecy by saying:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;

though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;

though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Lesson learned.