

Sermon – Luke 17:5-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
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“A Little Goes a Long Way”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. How much longer, I kept asking myself. How much longer would he have to go out there? It will surprise no one that one of my favorite things to do is watch our kids play sports. Great chunks of our family’s time are spent on ballfields, in hockey rinks, and along cross-country courses. Whether they win or lose, it brings me joy to watch them do what brings them joy. Nevertheless, it’s difficult for me to watch either of our sons pitch during baseball games. Not because they’re not good; it’s just so stressful – for me, anyway. So, I couldn’t help but wonder, how much longer? Torsten had been pressed into service with two outs and the bases loaded. When he got out of that without allowing too much damage, I let myself relax. He’d done his job. But then the coach had him pitch the next inning, and up my blood pressure went. Three up, three down, and I could breathe again. Surely, he was done now. And then the coach throws him out there for another inning! It was almost more than I could bear. How long, O Lord, would this go on? Of course, you can file this under “first-world problems.” How long? It’s a question that arises regularly in the human heart. The woman with cancer, counting days between chemotherapy treatments, praying the waiting is worth it. The draft-eligible man at the border between Russia and Georgia, trying hour after hour to get to the head of the line, hoping they brought enough rubles to bribe their way through. The families in our beloved Chicago, wondering when the scourge of gun violence will cease. The good news is that there

have been fewer homicides in Chicago compared to last year. The horrible news is that 448 homicides through August represents a decrease. How long, O Lord? How long?

2. Habakkuk cries out, "How long?" And not only that; the prophet does not even believe God is listening. If God were listening, would not God do something? Would not God act? But all around is injustice, oppression, and the coming destruction that Babylon would inflict upon them. How long, Lord? Are you not listening? Do you not care? Habakkuk is in the midst of an incredibly understandable crisis of faith. The world is quite literally falling apart all around him, and the response seems to be divine indifference.
3. The disciples are told by Jesus that they're in for a long road. Discipleship is difficult in a difficult world. Just before today's passage, the disciples are told that there will be grave consequences if they cause someone to stumble, but that if someone wrongs them, they must offer nothing but forgiveness in return. Knowing that the road is long, the apostles offer another cry of the heart: "Increase our faith!" In life's crucible, we yearn for enough faith to carry us through the long night of waiting.
4. In response to the disciples' plea, Jesus offers what might seem like a rebuke: If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could uproot and plant this mulberry tree in the sea. I'm not sure why someone would *want* to do such a thing to a mulberry tree, but no matter; Jesus wants his friends to know that a little faith goes a long way. Is he saying that don't have enough faith to do this? Perhaps. But perhaps not. I think that Jesus is actually offering a word of encouragement. If a little faith can empower magical landscaping projects, then surely the disciples have all the faith they need to do what is required of them in this world. Jesus calls his followers to a life of forgiveness, which is itself an act of faith. To let go of what others have done to us, to give our pain over to God, requires trust. As disciples, this is what is expected of us.

5. Growing up as a Boy Scout, the words of the Scout Oath were often on my lips, pledging to do my duty to God and country. It may just be the circles I run in, but we don't seem to talk about duty that much. Freedom and independence, yes; obedience and obligation, not so much. Yet this is the point Jesus drives home in his mini parable about the slaves or servants today. Will they be rewarded for doing what was expected of them? Of course not! You don't get extra credit for doing what is expected of you. So it is for us; Jesus calls us to a life of faith and stirs up in us more than enough faith to help us on our way. As we wait, we work. Jesus calls us away from a passive waiting for God to do something into an active, faithful waiting that seeks to enact the ways of the Kingdom, ways of forgiveness and life, in the world now. From war-torn regions halfway across the globe to the violence-riddled neighborhoods of our city, Jesus calls the faithful to work for change and gives us the faith to do so. This faith is not the absence of doubt or pure intellectual assent. It is the small seed within us that clings to Christ. We place our trust in Jesus, knowing there is no one else to whom we can turn.

6. Of course, faithful waiting and faithful working would leave us wanting were it not for the sure and certain promises of our God. For we, like Habakkuk before us, have seen a vision, plain as day. We have seen what the disciples had not yet seen. Taking upon himself the weight of unforgiven sin, unfulfilled obligations, ongoing injustice, and afflictions of every sort, he goes to the cross. And he waits. Three hours, which no doubt felt much longer, pass. And in the tomb, he waits. Three days, in which all seemed lost as creation held its breath. And then, in the joy of the morning's first light, everything changed. Salvation tarried no longer. Christ is arisen and we shall arise! Jesus uses the one work we will all complete, the inevitable act of dying, and transform it into the gate life, abundant and eternal.

7. Of course, today isn't Easter morning. Just the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, another ordinary day when sin and suffering continue. We still don't know the answer to the question: How long? Who knows? But if we aren't given an answer, we are given a promise: The God who longs for us has already come to us in Christ. Is already alive and at work in us. Is already lifting us up as visible signs for the sake of the world around us, signs of the salvation already won for us that will also one day come in fullness. Your faith may seem small, but it is there. It is enough. Enough for the joyful obligations of daily discipleship. You can leave the mulberry trees where they are, uprooting instead injustice and oppression and affliction wherever they try to take root. Following Jesus won't win you any awards, of course. No special benefits for doing what you're supposed to do. On the other hand, no matter what you do, God has already invited you to the banquet. Not because of what you've done, but because of what Christ has done for you. God longs for you, and it won't be long now. You can have faith in that promise. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.