

Proper 22c: Habakkuk 1:1-6 [7-11] 12-13; 2:1-4; Psalm:3-10; 2 Tim 1: [1-5] 6-14; Lk 17:5-10

Title: Keep the Faith

The albatross is a large and majestic sea-bird. While reading an excerpt from *Leadership* magazine, I recently learned that the albatross is an endangered species. So, as you might expect there are scientist who are dedicated to learning more about these great birds so as better know how to protect them. Needing to attract some subjects to work with, a group of scientists placed a hundred large wooden decoys - likenesses of the albatross if you will, on the Izu peninsula of Japan. One albatross, it turns out, really took the bait – I mean hook, line, and sinker. That bird was really smitten with one of the decoys.

Researcher Fumio Sato reported that for two years this bird, whom the researcher came to name Deko, worked very hard trying to woo a particular wooden decoy. He would build her fancy nests, he would vocalize, and he would strut around sometimes holding his head back and displaying his large wing-span -- inviting her to be his mate. And he would fight off all rival suitors. He spent his days, day after day, standing by the decoys' side. Said, Dr. Sato, "He seems to have no desire to date real birds."

A humorous story but it occurred to me that it could be about anything where there is infatuation with the imitation to the exclusion of the real thing.

Taken collectively, today's texts are about faith. About imitations of faith verses the "real thing?" These texts would seem to invite us to think about what might be called a 'lived faith' as compared to a faith that is completely intellectualized, fully rational, and totally comprehensible which, of course, is something of an oxymoron. These texts call us to think about a faith that guides our tongues, moves our feet, and informs our actions vs a faith that is so small it forever lives inside our head where it metastasizes into an inanimate, virtually impotent, useless thing.

From Luke, Jesus' disciples have seen Jesus doing great things. He has healed. He has restored hope where there was no hope. He has taught as one who has authority though he had no degrees, no credentials – at least none that have been awarded him by human institution. In the presence of the disciples, Jesus has done marvelous things, extraordinary things; seemingly impossible things. Miraculous things even.

The disciple's successes, on the other hand, would seem not nearly so great. And so they conclude that faith must have something to do with the ability to live a life something like Jesus was living. And so, thinking that more faith makes possible greater works, they ask Jesus to increase their faith.

"Jesus, it is obvious that your tank is full while ours is nearly on empty. Give us more faith. Give us more fuel for our faith tanks."

Kind of conjures up an image of pulling into the Chevron Faith Station doesn't it – a station where instead of the word 'gasoline' on the pump, it says 'faith.' And so at the Chevron Faith Station you could "fill-er up" and of course you could choose between regular faith, enhanced faith, or even the high octane version.

The disciples believe that they have pulled up to the Faith Station. "Jesus, give us more faith," was their request. Jesus' answer is a little ambiguous and certainly not to be taken literally when he talks about moving trees around with faith. Maybe Jesus is saying in effect, "You have all the faith you need. What you need to do is simply live like it."

Backing now through this morning's lessons, let us turn to Paul's letter to Timothy. It's a short letter and if the part we encounter this morning were to have a title, it might be entitled, "Keep the Faith my Brother." Timothy -- probably Paul's closest, most beloved co-worker for Christ -- apparently had been in some despair. Paul writes to encourage him. And among his words of encouragement are words intended to remind young Timothy of his heritage. He reminds Timothy of from whence comes his earliest understanding of such things as faith. It came from his mother and from his grandmother, Lois and Eunice.

I looked in a concordance and confirmed what I had expected. These two women are mentioned nowhere else in the Bible. Yet, had there been no Lois and had there been no Eunice, there would have been no Timothy. And had these women not passed on to Timothy the examples of their lives as persons who lived lives of faith, there most likely would have been no Timothy the church builder, Timothy the worker for Christ, Timothy the beloved disciple, timothy the protégé to Saint Paul, Timothy the man of faith.

And Paul knowing the power that these imagines and remembrances had on Timothy calls on Timothy to think of these women who have been so influential in his life. And he says remember what you learned through the examples of your blessed mother and grandmother. Remember what you learned about God and how God would have us live. And remember what you learned about faith. And be reminded that faith is not a precept, nor a theory; not a doctrine, nor a concept, but rather has to do with how one lives one's life relying on the reality and on the presence of God.

And finally we back up to this document from the Old Testament called Habakkuk. Habakkuk lived and wrote in the 6th century BC. He had been sorely disappointed in the leadership of King Jehoiakim whom he saw as an ego-centered

opportunist and whose foot was on the neck of the poor. Second Kings says of Jehoiakim that "he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" – a common phrase in the Old Testament to describe one whose actions were not consistent with God's heart and whose behavior therefore had been displeasing to God

At first Habbakuk had welcomed the invasion of the Babylonians (here called the Chaldeans). He had thought that rule under a foreign power would be better than life under a domestic tyrant. But he soon discovered that foreign rule was as much or more to be lamented than was life under Jehoiakim. The Babylonians seemed more like the oppressors from hell than liberators from heaven.

And as prophets tend to do, Habakkuk calls out to God, pleads with God, beseeches God not only on his behalf and on behalf of the people of his day, but more importantly on our behalf: He calls out: Where are you God? O, Lord do you not hear my cry? Are you not listening? Are you not paying attention?

All about me is violence, and evil, wrong-headedness and wrong-doing, and on such a massive scale, that were it a fiction, no one would believe it. And even you God should be astounded at its magnitude. The enemy would seem to worship no God other than their own ability to wreak havoc and destruction through violence. Why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow the righteous?

And to such an appeal, such a lament, one might experience a holy silence – a holy language that can be hard to translate and hard to interpret. But there was not silence - not this time.

The Lord answered the prophet. And he answered him plainly. And he says to the prophet, "Write this down. And write it so plainly and so boldly that no one can miss it. Write it so big and so bold that if you were running in a road race you would not miss a word of it as you ran by.

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, but the righteous live by their faith.

But the righteous live by their faith. That's what God had Habakkuk write down. That's what God said he wanted to make plain. That's what God told Habakkuk he wanted us to see as plain as day.

The righteous live by their faith.

Jesus had more or less said to his disciples: Fellas, it's not about having MORE faith. You've got enough faith. It's about learning to *rely* on the faith you've already got. It's about living your faith. "You see fellas," Jesus might have said, "the problem is not

having *more* faith; the problem is we seldom risk applying the faith that we have to the world as we know it and in which we live.”

If there had been movies in Jesus' time he might have reminded the disciples of the scene from the movie Indiana Jones wherein Indy was in search of the Holy Grail. And our hero had come to a place where he was teetering on the edge of a deep, vast, chasm. According to legend the way across was right before him, although he could not see that it was so. All he could see as he peered across to the other side was a deep, vast chasm which looked like the pit of death itself.

Yet, if Indiana Jones was to complete his quest he would have to trust what his eyes could not see. He would have to step out in faith, with no tangible assurance of support. And so fearful but determined, he steps out and discovers himself standing on a rock bridge, solid and firm. A bridge that had been invisible to the eye, but yet was now firm under his feet.

Joseph Campbell put it this way in an interview with Bill Moyers: He said majority rules not only in politics but in the realm of spiritual thinking as well. "But" Campbell said, "The majority is always wrong because it looks for salvation where salvation doesn't exist -- in the infinite world of the culture."

I end with this. Thinking along similar lines as Campbell, Richard Trench was inspired to write his poem, *God Our Refuge*:

If there had anywhere appeared in space
another place of refuge where to flee,
Our hearts had taken refuge in that place,
and not with Thee

For we against creation's bars had beat
Like prisoned eagles, through great worlds had sought
though but a foot of ground to plant our feet,
where Thou wert not

And only when we found in earth and air,
In heaven or hell, that such might nowhere be ---
That we could not flee from Thee anywhere,
We fled to Thee.

My brothers and sisters: Keep the faith.

Amen