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10/31/10

Fighting Faith

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

Habakkuk was a prizefighter. In the beginning of this short prophetic writing we meet him while he is busy. He is busy because he is fighting in the heaviest weight class you can imagine. He is yelling at God. “Oh Lord, how long am I going to cry for help and you are going to ignore me?” he says. He goes even further. He feels like it’s gotten so bad that God is rubbing his face in all the troubles of the world, making him see much more devastation than he can handle. Then, after he has laid out his complaint Habakkuk climbs up the highest tower he can find and he gets comfortable because he is planning on staying there, shaking his fist, until he gets an answer, any kind of answer, from God.

What makes his actions all the more jarring is that Habakkuk breaks with the regular sequence here. Usually if a prophet is going to be distressed or lament he starts with the “how long, O Lord” but then quickly moves to talk about the people and the terrible things they have done to bring such sadness upon themselves. Here Habakkuk begins the same way but, instead of turning his attention to the people, his gaze does not waver. He is only interested in fighting with God, not with anyone else. Instead of lamenting the people’s actions, he laments God’s inaction.

While Habakkuk doesn’t go into detail about the horrible things that have pushed him into this argument we could easily fill in the list for him. We watch in terror as countries play with the futures of their people and the people of the world like it was a game of jacks. We feel helpless to even face an issue like violence against women in the refugee camps of Sudan. We are stricken that somewhere in our own town today a small child is going to be beaten and we cannot even stop that. Today, while we celebrate the lives and gifts of the people who have died in this last year we do so grieving that so many died too soon and their loss is an ache that never fully leaves the heart and mind. For even the times like when my five year old told me that God keeps us all safe and we know that isn’t true; that isn’t a promise God can make. The innocent do suffer and the wicked walk away clean. When you see the world and how truly fallen it is—it makes me want to find the highest tower so I can shout and shake my fist as well.

Anyone a little uncomfortable right now? Some of us perhaps even more than a little. Probably we feel this way because we believe we have no right to fight. We are so lowly, we might say, that compared to the majesty and holiness of God that we have no right to speak with anger or demands. Actually, though, we stand in good company when we argue with God. Along with Habakkuk we’ve got Moses who argued not just once but many times that God had chosen the wrong person to lead the people out of slavery. Jeremiah who had no desire to serve God as a prophet and told God so. The psalmists pulled no punches when they wrote “Why have you forgotten me?” and “Do not taunt me like my enemies do” and “Hear my complaint, God...hear my cry”. Of course, Job spoke for so many of us when, out of his grief, he cried, “I will not hold my tongue, O God. I will tell you about the anguish in my spirit and I will complain in bitterness that is now my soul.”

All of these faithful people knew the basic but important truth that a relationship can still work, even if you fight. A relationship is only over when you stop talking altogether. In fact, only those who

have had a deep experience of faith can truly argue with God. In our faith, God shows us a glimpse of what the world could be like. We see what God's promises could mean for this world. It only makes sense, then, that when we look around us and see such discrepancies from what our faith tells us God wishes we should get good and mad. If we don't at some point fight with God then we either have our eyes closed to the world around us or our ears stopped up to God's promises. But, seeing and hearing clearly, we may have a fight on our hands.

Like the fighters who came before him, Habakkuk does not get judgment from God because he is arguing. Habakkuk gets an answer instead. God tells him, "The promises are still true. They are on their way and, even though it feels like they're taking forever they are coming as fast as they can and they will not be late." Is this the most fulfilling answer he could have received? Of course not. It is a little like a line from one of writer Wendell Berry's essays when he wrote: "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts." It does not solve Habakkuk's problems. It does not change the facts. We still experience the horrible discrepancies of this world.

Instead, we are given a choice and it really is the choice each of us is given regarding faith. We can see the terrible sadness in the world, feel its ache in our own hearts as it touches our lives, and we can lower our fists and our voices. We can walk down from that high tower and decide, in the face of this horribleness I will no longer hope at all. Or, perhaps, we can decide we will only have hope in ourselves, which, quickly, is the same as having no hope at all.

Or we can see that same terrible sadness in the world, feel its ache in our own hearts as it touches our lives and we can decide to have hope in God that the promises are not a lie. They are still true even though we have already waited so long. That is really the choice. Where do you put your hope and your trust? In yourself? Then you are just puffed up, as Habakkuk puts it, and are doomed to lose heart. Only hope in God will keep us strong. That is what that last line is about. "The righteous live by faith" actually means "they live by their steadfastness; by their endurance." We have a choice every day. We can stay in that tower or we can climb down those steps and walk away. We have a choice. The righteous choose to stay in the tower, whether it is to praise God or lament our sorrows or even shake our fists and scream. We choose to stay in the tower for our faith is worth the fight. Amen.