

The book we know as Habakkuk is written at different times in a period of history some 600 years before the time of Christ. Some of the messages in this obscure prophet seem to come as a result of military actions of nations around Israel. God uses them to judge Israel. The ultimate message of Habakkuk is found in the very last chapter. "God, the Lord, is my strength." (1396, Richards)

There is another idea, a complimentary idea in Habakkuk. It is part of this conviction that God is our strength. It identifies the reality of patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It names the experience of David. It is on the lips of those who try to turn Israel back to God in the period of the prophets. It is an idea that nearly sings its way into the writings of the Apostle Paul. When he composes his great letter to the church in Rome, he remembers a line from Habakkuk, "*The righteous live by faith.*" (Habakkuk 2:4) (Romans 1:17)

This morning, we see how this idea resonates in the heart of a greedy man like Zacchaeus. It makes its way through the entire gospel of Luke. These characters wrestle with what it means to live by faith. For example, Peter is confronted by Jesus after he makes his confession of who Jesus is. He cannot understand yet how he will follow a man who will "undergo great suffering and be rejected by elders, chief priests and scribes." (Luke 9:22) Martha and Mary are two sisters confronted by Jesus as he comes to spend some time in their home. Martha cannot understand how her sister's attention to Jesus is an example for her. (10:38-42) Pharisees and scribes hear stories about a lost sheep and lost coin and two lost brothers. They cannot understand yet how these relate to them. (15:1-32) A rich ruler cannot yet understand how selling all his possessions and giving them to the poor enables him to follow Jesus. All of these wrestle with this insight: *The righteous live by faith.*

Today we read Jesus is passing through Jericho. There is a rich supervisor for all the tax collectors named Zacchaeus. On his way through town, Jesus stops and sees him in a tree with crowds pressing all around. He calls him by name. He says he is coming to stay at his house for the day. While Zacchaeus scrambles out of the tree, people complain about Jesus visiting his home; he is such a sinner. This chief tax collector walks proudly with Jesus through the streets to his home. He swaggers. When they arrive there, Zacchaeus has his wife and family prepare a sumptuous table for Jesus and his friends. They sit down and eat together. After a while, Zacchaeus is moved by Jesus' presence in his home. He stands up and tells everyone he will give half his possessions to the poor. He even says if he has wronged anyone, he will pay them back four times the amount he has cheated them. Jesus is impressed. He says something his host has never heard: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

If anyone would ever claim that a story so embodies the faith and experience of the church, then they might choose a story like this one. Zacchaeus helps us remember why we believe in the church. He helps us remember how this story is really our experience of God and grace and we experience "*the righteous live by faith.*"

Here is what I think. We believe in the church because God calls us by name. We put this idea up on our baptism banner. "Today God called my name." When we stand up to have our children baptized, the minister uses the name of our child. This is true and it reflects a wider, larger reality. God calls us by name. According to Jesus in Matthew even the hairs on our heads are numbered. God knows each of us personally. When I say "God calls us by name," I am not referring to something ritual. There comes a moment in our lives when we experience God is addressing us.

There comes this moment in the story. Jesus is standing in front of a particular sycamore tree. He looks up and encourages Zacchaeus to come down because he is going to spend some time in his home that day. It is a personal moment. It is a moment when Zacchaeus' heart begins to race. He is personally addressed. He knows Jesus knows who he is. When we sense someone has stood before us in the name of God and invited us to come and be present, we pay attention. Perhaps someone invites you to church. A friend encourages you to get involved in a mission trip. Somehow God addresses us personally. We believe in the church because we recognize God's engaging us personally.

We also believe in the church because good news comes to our house. Good news confronts us. Good news comes into our experience. The good news of the church is Jesus Christ. Read all the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles: Jesus Christ and him crucified. We sing, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. We encounter him in many ways. In Zacchaeus' case, Jesus comes to his home. Jesus sits down at his table. Jesus talks to his wife and children. The very good news of God takes up space in Zacchaeus' house, with his family. They share a meal. And Zacchaeus is

touched by what this itinerant rabbi does. We believe in the church because good news comes into our lives and into our homes too.

We believe in the church because we have the opportunity to respond. When and how do all of these characters in Luke respond? Peter, Martha, Mary, Pharisees and scribes, the rich ruler, Zacchaeus responds with different values, with a different heart and a different focus. Half his possessions he gives to the poor. Where he has cheated people out of their taxes, he will reimburse them fourfold. Luke wants us to hear this. He believes Jesus' Spirit moves us to do faithful things with our money. When is it that we respond? The church is asking you today to give and to give generously because this Savior is in your life, in your home. He is rescuing you from sin and death. How will you respond?

Finally, we believe in the church because here God blesses us. Here God confirms us. Here our faith is acknowledged. We are recognized as God's own family. The work that Steven and Sherry is important because our young people want the opportunity to have their own faith in Christ made stronger, to have their faith confirmed. This is something we all need not just once in our lives but many times. Zacchaeus' is confirmed as one of God's own. He is confirmed in a way he never expects. "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19:9)

Like Zacchaeus, we believe because God blesses us.

Richards, Kent Harold, *Habakkuk*, The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, General Editor, Wayne Meeks, HarperCollins, Publishers, New York, NY, 1993.

We praise you for this truth, the righteous live by faith. We are not righteous. We are simply forgiven sinners. We desire to do what is right. Lord, guide our believing. Guide our sense of who we are. Guide us in the choices we make so that you may use us, even us in the ministry of your church. WE come worshipping you. Embrace us, surprise us again by your grace and allow us to respond in ways that delight you. We pray for a broken world, for broken friends. Heal them and love them, give them and this world hope. We pray in Jesus' name as he has taught us. Our Father who art in heaven...