



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21057

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 18th, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

THE Old Testament lesson at Morning Prayer is from the Book of the Prophet Habakkuk -- one of the folks Scriptural scholars call "Minor Prophets." This isn't because their works are unimportant, but because they are short. Habakkuk's book runs to a mere three chapters -- not enough to require a whole scroll to itself.'

We don't know much about Habakkuk except that he was a temple musician -- a sort of Seventh Century BC Adric -- who prophesied at sometime before 630 BC. It was a time when the people of Judah were in one of their worst stages of apostasy. They flouted the commandments and worshipped some really nasty foreign Gods.

What worried Habakkuk is a question all Christians ask at one time or another: "God how long are you going to let this go on? How long are you going to leave these wicked people in charge down here?"

Imagine how surprised Habakkuk was to hear God answer his question. "I am doing something about it, Habakkuk," the Lord told him, "I'm doing something that will astound you and everybody else. I'm raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians -- a people who disappeared off the face of the earth a thousand years ago -- Habakkuk. They're going to wipe out those sinners you hate so much. They will destroy everything in the land of Judah. They're going reduce every stronghold and fortress to a heap of rubble."

This wasn't what Habakkuk had bargained for.

He's a bit like us in that respect. He wanted to see sinners punished, but, basically, he wanted things to remain the same. He wanted to see sinners punished, but he didn't want society to change -- at least not radically. When Habakkuk heard what God is proposing to do, he started to back off. And that's where today's lesson begins . . .

"Wait a minute, Lord," he says, "Aren't you supposed to be God, the Holy One. Surely you aren't going to wipe out the whole nation of Judah. Why are you going to have them punished by men even more wicked than they are? Why would you let wicked people destroy people more righteous than themselves?"

It is, of course, a question that has puzzled mankind since the very beginning of history: Why does God permit wicked men to destroy people much more righteous than themselves? It seems so totally unfair. But this response fails to take into account the nature of righteousness. Being righteous is rather like being pregnant. There are no half measures. Either you're pregnant or you're not. There's no in-between. Just like you can't be "a bit" pregnant, you can't be "a bit" righteous.

God told Habakkuk that folks cannot expect to evade responsibility for their sins simply because they are not as sinful as their neighbors. While, for example, the people of Judah were by no means as evil as the Babylonians, they bore a heavier burden of responsibility for their sins. They were God's chosen people and he had personally given them the commandments they were flouting.

The Babylonians, by contrast, had had none of these advantages. They weren't the chosen people. God hadn't revealed himself to them, and they were quite unaware of the explicit standards he expects his people to maintain. This, however, did not exonerate them. They were well aware of the difference between good and evil. It doesn't require God's personal revelation to know that. And God told Habbakuk he would punish them too – but in his own good time and at his own convenience.

This should be a worrisome lesson for all Christians, everywhere. All too often we take comfort in the knowledge that while we're not very good Christians, we are still an awful lot better than the vast proportion of non-Christians. But Habakkuk learned we shouldn't feel comfortable at all. His message is vitally important for folks searching for God in an age of easy morals and cheap grace. While God is love, this isn't all he is. He is also a God of righteousness and judgment. People who flout his laws and ignore his calls to repent will, ultimately, face judgment.

That's the bad news. The good news comes in today's Gospel reading – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It compares the human idea of love, with God's ideal of love. It answers the question of how we should treat our neighbors. It tells us that we should try to love them in the same way that Jesus Christ, himself, loves them. The good Samaritan behaves as Christ, himself, would behave.

The man who fell among thieves was a disgusting sight. He was mass of wounds, covered with blood, teeming with flies. The Samaritan had no way of knowing whether he was a criminal or suffering from a contagious disease. But he ignored the man's repulsive condition. He didn't pause to wonder how he got that way. He went, unhesitatingly, to help him. Jesus is like that. He takes no notice of what we look like, what we have done, or how we got that way. He takes us just as we are, and stretches out his hand to help.

Jesus doesn't care about what we think about him or how much we might have hurt or disappointed him in the past. The Samaritan behaves the same way. He was a member of a hated minority. He must have suffered time and again at the hands of Pharisees, like the man he went to help -- insulted, spat upon, even beaten.

The wounded man undoubtedly hated Samaritans as much as the priest and the Levite who passed him by. Indeed, if the injured man had been healthy, he would no doubt have refused to eat in the same room as the Samaritan. But the Samaritan – like Jesus – took no notice of what the man thought of him. He saw a human being in desperate need and came immediately to his aid.

Luke tells us: "When he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him."

When Jesus seeks to help us, he gives us everything. He holds nothing back. Even though Jesus is God Incarnate, God the Son – a person infinitely more important than our own insignificant selves – he gave up his life for us: the thing we value more than anything in the world. He suffered the agony of death so that we might live. Jesus spends and holds nothing backs.

This is exactly what the Samaritan does. He doesn't leave the guy lying there and go to find help. He does the job himself. He rolls up his sleeves, cleans up the injured man and bandages his wounds. Then he puts him on his own donkey and takes him to an inn. But, even there, he doesn't turn him over to the servants he continues to nurse the man himself.

And the next day, satisfied that the man is well on the road to recovery, he opens his billfold and counts out the equivalent of a week's wages. He hands the money over to the innkeeper to cover the cost of caring for the injured man and says: "If you need to spend more, I will pay whatever it costs." He doesn't dicker. He doesn't set a price on things. He doesn't say: "Try and do things as economically as possible." He simply says: "Spend as much as you need and send me the bill."

This is the degree of love, the degree of selflessness Christians should emulate. It's an impossible goal, but it's our duty to try. When we fail – when inevitably we fall among thieves, as inevitably happens, Jesus, like the Good Samaritan, is always there to patch us up, to comfort us and help put us back on our feet.

He will never turn his back on us. He will never pause to count the cost. To receive his help, all we have to do is accept it. In other words, it's a deal you'd be plain foolish to refuse. *AMEN.*