

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Unanswered prayers are troubling to people of faith. Most of us say daily prayers to lay a foundation for our spiritual life, but when a crisis comes, we may ask God for a big favor: relief from hurricanes or excessive heat; a change to the diagnosis of a serious illness; healing for a broken relationship. These are “911 prayers” offered at a moment of grave concern in hopes that God will sweep in like the police or the fire department, and come to the rescue. When saying these prayers doesn’t bring the answer that our faith has led us to expect, it can ricochet and trouble us.

After all, the reason we address such requests to God is what we believe about God: God is all-powerful, and God is just. God expects us to act on behalf of the poor; surely God should act on our behalf when we feel needy as well.

The prophet Habakkuk gives voice to these feelings today. This is the only Sunday we hear from him in the three-year cycle of readings. He probably lived in the early 600s BC. Enemies were invading his land. Speaking on behalf of the kingdom of Judah, Habakkuk raised serious complaints before the Lord. He prays, “I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not intervene.... Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and clamorous discord.” Habakkuk formulates two questions arising from these complaints, both of them common queries we have each probably asked God at one time or another in times of desperation. The first question is, “How long, O Lord?” and the second is, “Why do you let me see ruin; why must I look at misery?” We can more easily endure suffering if we know how long it will last, that it will come to an end; or if we only know why, if there is some good that our suffering brings about. We suffer willingly for a purpose all the time.

We do not always get a reply from God, but Habakkuk reports that he did. He says quite plainly halfway through this reading, “The Lord answered me.” Now, as is sometimes typical of the Lord, the answer does not seem to be a direct response to the two questions, but in its own oblique way it illuminates a way forward. The Lord has a vision, and he instructs the prophet to write it down clearly so that anyone can read it readily. In words of sweeping consolation, the Lord says, “For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late.” The Lord encourages perseverance: “the just one, because of his faith shall live.”

The lectionary gives us this reading today because of a line in the gospel. Jesus tells the apostles, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Jesus says your strong faith can produce good results. The Lord makes a different point to Habakkuk: Your patient faith will receive good results. You aren’t influencing the future, you live in trust that God’s future is coming, and that whatever it brings will be good.

We do not always get the answer we want from our 911 prayers. But Habakkuk would have us recall something more important: God has a vision. It will not disappoint you. Wait for it. God will reward your faithfulness. You will see.