

To the saints of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How often have you cried out to God, ‘O Lord, how long?’ How long must we suffer with this physical ailment, how long must we deal with that sinner in our midst, and how long must we wait for the things we desire?

Your cries do not stand alone- they echo the cries of God’s people in every age, in many trying situations, when the evil and sin of this world crowds around us like walls. The prophet Habakkuk looked out at the world around him, and saw evil, evil that corrupted the chosen people of God. A prophet usually calls Israel to task for failing to live up to their covenant with God- Habakkuk calls on God to hold up his end of the bargain.

Habakkuk knows that sin deserves punishment, that God Himself pledged to carry out that punishment, and He called on God to be faithful. We know exactly what Habakkuk is talking about. We look around us at a world filled with sin, where adultery and homosexuality are praised on TV, where pornography fills the internet, where people can ridicule God as much as they please. The wicked seem to prosper, getting ahead in their jobs, having the attractive spouses, and making the most money. We are persecuted by sin in so many ways, assaulted by Satan, while those who disobey God’s law strike it rich. We cry out with Habakkuk, [1:2-3a] “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry out to you ‘violence,’ and you do not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?” O Lord, how long?

God’s answer to our complaint, to our calling him to honor the promises He made to protect and care for us, is not what we expect. Habakkuk is told that the Babylonians will sweep down and destroy the wicked in Judah, they will defeat God’s promised nation and bring them into bondage. But there is only one problem for this bold prophet- how can a just and holy God use a sinful nation to punish sin? In Habakkuk’s eyes, the Babylonian conquerors will be worse than the evildoers in Judah. And what do we think? The ‘sinners’ in our society are punished by thieves and robbers, they are killed by terrorists. Sin is punished, but often by those who are more terrible than those they hurt. Even the government, established by God to restrain evil, is sinful in itself. To Habakkuk and us, God has not given a solution, He has increased the problem. In between the two parts of our text, the prophet offers a second complaint, one that we echo: [1:13b] “why do you idly look at traitors, and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” We want deliverance from sin, we want deliverance from those whom God has appointed to punish sin, we cry out, O Lord, how long?

But neither we nor Habakkuk can be let off the hook that easily. We have complained to God as those ‘poor righteous people’ who are so persecuted from sin. We deserve to be saved from sin by God, because we simply are too holy to stay in a sinful world. In doing this the prophet along with us have ignored our own sin. We too are corrupted by the very evil that fills our world. And not only that, but we commit the very sins we see in

others. We may not commit adultery with our bodies, but we do with our eyes. We may not murder, but we hate others in our thoughts and words. We, no more than any of those evil people ‘out there,’ deserve God’s wrath and punishment. We do need deliverance- but not only deliverance from this evil world, we need deliverance from ourselves and our own sin. We need this deliverance because without it we will be swept up in the punishment for sin that is eternal. With Habakkuk we cry out ‘O Lord, how long?’

We want deliverance right away, like the prophet we are impatient. Habakkuk writes, [2:1] “I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.” God does answer Habakkuk, and us all, not with immediate deliverance, but the promise that God will punish the evildoer. God answers us [2:3] “For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end- it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.” God’s deliverance will come, but it will come on his schedule. God’s time is not our time, and so we still cry out ‘O Lord, how long?’

God assures Habakkuk throughout the rest of the book that Babylon will be punished for its sin, that God will honor his promise. And so Judah was taken into bondage by Babylon, just as God promised, then the Babylonians were defeated and Judah returned home, just as God promised. But God had greater deliverance in mind for both Habakkuk and us. In God’s time, on His divine schedule, a baby was born in Bethlehem. God promised [2:3b] “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

For the children of God, the promised messiah was slow in coming, but for God’s timeframe, Jesus Christ came at exactly the right time. In a great reversal, the sinless Son of God chose to enter this sinful world and do something about the corruption of sin. This was God’s plan and purpose all along, as Paul writes in our epistle lesson. God delivered us through [9b-10] “His own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light.” Christ died on the cross to grant us the deliverance Habakkuk cried out for, to take away the condemnation of sin from us. Then He rose victorious on the third day, granting life and salvation to all. Now when we ask, ‘O Lord, how long?’ God answers with Christ crucified and risen for the sins of the entire world.

And yet we remain in this sinful world, cleansed and redeemed from the condemnation of sin, but yet still sinning. But Christ has promised ultimate deliverance. God spoke through Habakkuk, [2:3a] “For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end- it will not lie.... For the righteous shall live by faith”

The apostles said to the Lord, “add to us faith!” And the Lord said, “If you have faith like a grain of mustard

seed... Fellow-Redeemed, do you see it? Even though the apostles don't realize it, in Christ they have the faith needed to do miraculous things, to forgive seven times and even seventy times seven. Like a mustard seed, the faith God gives them in Christ conceals great power. Through them Christ will absolve sin and do wonders for His kingdom.

Add to us faith, that You our Master still come among us to serve us; that this very day You prepare for us a banquet of Your own body and Your own blood. Instead of saying, "wait on Me" You our Master still serve us and say, "take and eat", "take and drink".

Dear unworthy servants, all this Jesus does because He bore the millstone of our sin around His neck and was submerged under our sentence. He never tempted anyone to sin. He faithfully rebuked sin, never looking the other way. He perfectly forgave those who sinned against Him even to His cry "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." All that stands against you has been hurled into the depths of the sea. He comes to you who repent forgiving you again and again and again, releasing you from all sin. By His sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection He abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel (II Tim. 1)

So rejoice at His Word like one who finds great spoil!

The righteous shall live by his faith. By the faith Jesus gives - your soul will not be puffed up thinking you have ever gone above and beyond the call of duty. Is it not a sign of our sin-sickness that we seek recognition and credit before God; that we turn inward and feel slighted and grow weary in God's kingdom? Is it not the supreme sign of our salvation that our Master serves us with healing food and releases us from every single time we miss the mark?

Paul echoes that same confidence that we have in the coming Lord: [12] "But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." In the same way, while we may still labor in a world filled with sin, where the cries of 'O Lord, how long?' come from our lips, we have the confidence that Christ has redeemed us, he has rescued us from the power of sin to condemn us eternally. And because He has done that, He will come again one day in glory to bring us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven. That is the hope that we have, a faith sustained by Word and Sacrament every time we enter this place. This faith, given by Christ, is strengthened by Christ, and as God says through His prophet Habakkuk, [2:4b] "The righteous shall live by his faith." Amen.