

<Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; Luke 17:5-10>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

There are three major, iconic sites & attractions in South Dakota. A middling state by geographic area - 17th overall - South Dakota only feels like it goes on forever when you're driving on the east/west interstate, with little to nothing to break up a view that can become monotonous to the casual glance. When making that drive, it can be the promise of these iconic sites that keeps one going; the hope of seeing them realized becomes the motivation itself. For those who have never made this drive across our 40th state, two of these sites readily come to mind - Mt. Rushmore Memorial Site and Badlands National Park. The third site, however, is perhaps the most heavily promoted.

Beginning along the interstate even before you cross the South Dakota border, hundreds of miles if traveling from Minnesota, billboards begin to appear with calculated regularity: Whatever you might need can be found at the Wall Drug Store.

"Get your bison-burger at the Wall Drug Store," one such billboard might read. Another would promote: "Fill up your tank at Wall Drug Store." And yet another might offer: "Huckleberry ice cream at the Wall Drug Store." In this day and age, nearly anything the family on vacation might need or want is available at Wall Drug. But the first billboards for this out-of-the-way drug store in an almost no-name town had nothing to do with any of that, it simply offered the one thing almost guaranteed to meet the need of any person: "free ice water."

In a state that might otherwise seem bleak, monotonous, and un-ending, the promise of a place to stop and quench your thirst along the journey became a beacon of hope and encouragement.

What might your billboard offer, if you were to put one in your front yard? What might your promise to the world and the people around be if you were to carry a sign with you for all to read?

Habakkuk the prophet finds himself in a similar position as all the other prophets, though Habakkuk is a slightly lesser-known one: he must go to the people of God and inform them that they have erred, that God is displeased, and also that God is calling them back. By now we should understand that as the common theme of all prophets. And our readings from Habakkuk support this: God seems far off and removed, uncaring of the plight of the people due to their actions and inactions, the ways in which they have not lived as the people they are called to be. "Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at evil?" the prophet cries, echoing the voice of the people. "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise."

And even as we hear these ancient words of a long-ago age and people read, we recognize the never-ending truth and reality of them in our own lives, our own world. This is why the prophets of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, can so often be difficult to read, or feel judgmental and criticizing: they hold up a mirror which both reflected society of the age and, too often, continues to reflect human nature today. And as such, it can be hard to find hope in these words. But hope is there, nonetheless.

As we continue in our reading from Habakkuk, God responds, saying, “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.” Today, that would be interpreted as, ‘put it on a billboard.’ But put “what,” precisely? What is the vision God commands the prophet to remind the people of, even as they have gone astray?

It is not a question that is relegated and confined to the people of one time and place, only. It is a question which has echoed through the ages and continues to come into our conversations today. But we can look back to another time and place in the history of the people of God and see its evidence, as well, as we seek to faithfully answer.

The disciples of Jesus have just such a question, though it’s phrased in a different way. Facing the uncertainty of how to live not only as God’s people but as Jesus’ disciples in this world, following several teachings on the nature and calling of discipleship, they approach Jesus asking to have their faith increased. Perhaps sensing that this calling will ask much of them, they desire a greater measure of faith on which to draw. And the answer is somewhat...underwhelming.

First, Jesus responds by assuring them that even if they had faith the size of the mustard seed - and we all remember how small and minuscule is just such a seed - then they would have the capability to move mountains. That raises all kinds of further questions and uncertainties, in my mind. But before any of those can be addressed, Jesus goes on to do what Jesus does best: he frames the teaching in a parable. Again, however, this parable is not necessarily reassuring...if you’re looking for a grand, miraculous example, that is.

The parable Jesus shares almost seems to say, “don’t expect any special treatment, just do your work.” And that tone sounds harsh, but I don’t think that the lesson is all that far off, because Jesus is aware of a dynamic that the disciples don’t yet seem to believe as readily: *that they already have within them the capability and the faith to live into the calling they have received.*

Jesus’ parable is one of a servant coming in from the fields and then continuing to go about the tasks of the day, preparing and serving dinner for the household. It may seem like it’s a lesson to just put your head down and do what you’re told, but the deeper nuance, the more reassuring nuance, is that the servant is merely doing what is expected, and what is capable of doing. And therein lies the reassurance: the life of faith, the calling of discipleship, is simply the living out of what we are already capable of doing.

The reassurance of Jesus is that the disciples are already capable of the calling they have received. All they need to do is what they already know and expect to do, and to be who they are. Relatedly, the promise of God to metaphorically be written on tablets by the prophet Habakkuk, is that God’s nature is faithfulness, even when the people are wayward.

What would your billboard say, if you had one in your front yard? What would be the promise on a sign, as a proclamation of your faith, if one were to exist?

Because the thing about billboards is that they have to fulfill on the promise that they make. Families and tourists driving across the never-ending state of South Dakota knew that they could stop at Wall Drug Store and get a free cup of ice water to parch their thirst and refresh their spirits. They knew it from almost 400 miles away. What would your billboard proclaim? What does our church’s metaphorical billboard promise?

God has made a promise of hope: hope to the people, even in their sin and error; hope to the disciples, even in their doubt and uncertainty; hope to the world, even when it seems devoid of such hope.

On the Book of Habakkuk, commentator Elizabeth Achtemeier offers this: “Habakkuk is above all else a book about the purposes of God and about the realization of [God’s] will for the world...It is a book about God’s desire that human beings live together in joy and security and righteousness, in a community ordered by divine will and faithful to divine lordship.”

As a people of God, in the here and the now of today’s world, this is our calling and proclamation, still. As we come to the Table of Christ as the communion of faith, this is both the promise we receive anew and the promise we take again into the world: that God is the God of hope, in whatever manner that may be realized. Hope for restoration, hope for security, hope for connection, even hope to live into the calling before us. A promise of hope realized and manifest. A billboard for all to see, in all times and places. A billboard written on our hearts and in the very lives we live. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*