

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 26, Year C (track one)

First Reading

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.  
So the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never goes forth.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
so justice goes forth perverted

Insert Divider

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.

And the LORD answered me:

"Write the vision;  
make it plain on tablets,  
so he may run who reads it.  
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.

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,  
but the righteous shall live by his faith. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11-12

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. (ESV)

*This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 19:1–10

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He

has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

Oh, my goodness. How to make sense of the reading from Habbakuk without the enormous number of verses that were omitted. I almost can't do it, but there were too many to put in in italics, the way I usually do. They'd have overwhelmed the actual lectionary text. Instead, I'll do my best to summarize what's left out.

Habakkuk prophesies to the nation of Judah, somewhere in the latter portion of the seventh century, B.C. Probably around the same time as Zephaniah and Jeremiah. In the first part of our reading he decries the faithlessness and injustice of God's people, and asks God when He'll do anything about it. Then we get the omitted portion.

In it:

God points out that He's sending the Babylonians in Judgment.

Habakkuk then describes Babylon as a fisherman gathering up everyone before him in nets and destroying them. Then offering sacrifices to “his nets.”

Then Habakkuk asks God if “he,” that's Babylon, will be allowed to go on doing this forever.

The second portion of our reading comes after all that. So the “he” whose soul is puffed up in verse 4, to whom God refers is Babylon, not a single man. And so we can safely say that the “righteous” who will live by “his” faith is also not a reference to an individual who will live by faith, but a people. God's people.

Honestly, this is scant reassurance in the face of the invading armies of Babylon, but it does contrast God's people with the nation of Chaldea. Their faith is the source of their life, not their military might, which puffs up the Babylonians. Later in verse two God also speaks the destruction of the Babylonians through Habakkuk, but it isn't offered as an imminent rescue.

In a way similar to the things I wrote about the Gospel two weeks ago, faith here is not something that brings immediate relief, though it does sustain through trial because the

oppressed one knows themselves to be vindicated. This allows us to act from a place of peace and even love when confronted by those who would call us “enemy.” This in turn empowers us to bring change in the midst of chaos because we’re not caught up in it.

## Second Reading

All right. At last I’m a little relieved you won’t hear those verses that are in italics from 2 Thessalonians read aloud in church on Sunday. While I think they have some value for us in the context of Bible study, they would be too distracting in Sunday worship, and almost demand that the preacher deal with them lest they get a hook into members of the congregation and make it impossible for them to “celebrate” the rest of the Eucharist because they’d be sitting in the pews wondering, “Did Paul mean what I think I just heard?”

Still, as I just said, they do have value for us, if primarily for God to show us how quickly we can turn from the Gospel and begin preaching something else. The idea that God would inflict vengeance on those who do not know Him is utterly contrary to the heart of God that we’ve seen demonstrated again and again throughout the ministry of Jesus and the writings of the prophets. I myself am prone to think this way. “If people don’t know God, don’t really know Him, whose fault is that? Certainly not theirs. That’s on me.”

And that’s part of the reason that I want to talk about the authorship of 2 Thessalonians. I won’t go on at great length, you can find a good discussion of it on the internet (Wikipedia even has a pretty good summary of the subject) but the core of it is this. There is no agreement among scholars about whether or not Paul wrote it. I come down firmly on the side of the argument that says he did not. There are good textual and theological grounds for seeing this as an imitation of 1 Thessalonians, perhaps by a disciple of Paul’s (though how they could get Paul so wrong is beyond me) but beyond the discussion of the incompatibility of the eschatologies of the two letters, there is simply the heart of the author, and his apprehension of the heart of Jesus. The author of 2 Thessalonians is simply not someone to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Damascus. It lacks that intimacy with Him.

Paul can be difficult, even irascible, but this is neither of those things. This is a shift to another gospel, not the one that Paul preached. Yes, there are Pauline ideas in the letter, because the author copied much of 1 Thessalonians into 2 Thessalonians, no doubt to secure its reception. But you and I know the heart of God, revealed in Jesus, revealed to Paul. It’s clear to me that some of these scholars do not. And I don’t blame them. If they don’t know Jesus, whose fault is it? Mine. Well, ours, who do.

But it's in the Bible, which means God wanted it there. And if God wanted it there it's because it has something to teach me. And as I said above, I think that a major thing I have to learn here is how easy it was, even in the first or early second century (some scholars date 2 Thessalonians to the first decade of the second century) to see things from a human position, rather than as one seated already in the heavenlies with Christ. (Ephesians 2:6)

## Gospel Text

I don't always read the whole Gospel text in the Greek before I write these, but when I do, it's (usually) because I woke up thinking, "I really need to read the whole thing in Greek this time." (And I don't know why until after I do it.)

Such was the case this week. I just didn't have anything to say about this text. I mean, I love this story, but it almost preaches itself. Why try to say anything. I try not to add words here unless I'm finding something that feels fresh to me, something that draws me in somehow. I don't suppose I keep to that standard *every* time, but I try.

So I hadn't written anything about this passage from Luke yet, and I needed to get it finished before leaving to visit family where I won't have much opportunity to write. And I woke up and thought, "Read the whole thing in Greek. There's something there you'll see."

And sure enough, I did, and I did. Nothing earth shaking, but something that caught at my heart and makes me want to write.

It all came down to one little Greek word, *dei*. I know, that kind of looks like a word for God, but you're thinking in Latin now, not Greek. No, *dei* (a form of *deō*) is the Greek word for "must." Or, "It is necessary." It's a really powerful little word. It carries the weight of its other meanings, compel, restrain, imprison. And Jesus uses this word of Himself. He was compelled to go and dine with Zacchaeus that day.

What captured my attention, even my heart when I read that little "*dei*" in the text was Jesus' sensitivity to what the Father is doing around Him. He's walking down the street surrounded by crowds and suddenly He looks up into a tree to find Zacchaeus, way in the back? Of course He does, because He's constantly on the lookout for what God is doing, and choosing to be a part of it. It's like Jesus said in John 5:19. "The Son only does what He sees the Father doing."

And God has been preparing Zacchaeus' heart for this moment. The story tells us that the chief tax collector was anxious "to see who Jesus was." This is not a disinterested kind of seeing that this short little man wanted. It wasn't mere idol curiosity. There are two words for seeing in Greek that Luke might have used, *blepo* is the word for "seeing" in that simpler sense, just to observe. But *oraō* is the word Luke used to describe the kind of seeing that Zacchaeus desired, and that word means to want to see so as to understand, or, perhaps more significantly, to see in a spiritual sense. He is drawn to Jesus, even though he doesn't know it, because God has been preparing his heart for this moment of repentance, of turning his life.

And Jesus senses that, and is compelled to go to dine with him. Compelled. He grasps the Father's heart for Zacchaeus and he can do no less than to spend His precious, limited time with the man in the tree.

We get no preaching, no teaching, just Jesus' presence at table with the tax collector, but that is enough to bring to fruition the work that God had already started in his heart. He repents of his greed and decides without any guidance to make reparations far greater than anything he'd stolen in the past. Not out of guilt, but out of love for the One who was compelled by love to be with him. That is the Jesus Zacchaeus "saw." As Paul puts it in Romans 2:4, "the kindness of God leads you to repentance."

It is for this reason that Jesus proclaims that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house. Not because he repented. That is just the fruit of repentance, not the cause of salvation. But Zacchaeus has been made whole because he is a son of Abraham, and is beloved. Jesus is recognizing that work of God in the heart of one of God's children.

I'm going to risk adding something to all this for us in the present. There were dozens, perhaps scores of people crowding around Jesus at the moment that He looked up into the tree to find the one to whom He was called to minister in that moment. If we take seriously our call to minister to the world in the Name of Jesus, there will be a need for us to be just as sensitive to what the Father is doing so that we can move in concert with what is already in motion. This is where we turn to the Holy Spirit and learn to listen to the small nudges that say, "Look, up there, in that tree, that one!" We aren't called to minister to everyone. God may not be at that point where it's time for us to step forward with the person on your right, but He may be with the one on your left. Learning to discern that difference is key. And fun, when you get it right!