

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Set a globe at the center of your group. Open a bible beside it. Pray together from the prophet Habakkuk.

LEADER: How long, O Holy One, shall I cry for help?

ALL: *How long will you not listen?*

LEADER: Then the Holy One answered me.

ALL: *Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.*

LEADER: For there is still a vision for the appointed time. If it seems to tarry, wait for it.

ALL: *It will surely come, it will not delay.*

Faith has power. It lives in us. Like a seed it holds and generates new life. A smidge can accomplish the impossible. That's how Jesus talks in Sunday's gospel.

The message speaks to our time when many confess they hang on to faith by a thread. Scandals in the church have disheartened many, and so has treatment of those in our families who are gay and lesbian. But a thread is enough, according to Jesus.

A question is enough, even a doubt. Curiosity, engagement, disgust can take us to a threshold that invites growth.

Faith lives in the currents of our relationships. Faith

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

ties our lives to those we trust and thank. Faith grounds us in existence and purpose. Faith is about to whom and to what we belong.

Faith is to our conscious lives what blood is to the body; it sustains and animates our whole selves. Faith is our heart for embracing life, its giver and sustainer, the incomprehensible mystery of it all.

In earlier decades people joined in worship as part of the culture of their neighborhoods

and towns. Today as theologian Karl Rahner predicted, Christians will be mystics or not be Christians at all. We have to recognize our personal experiences of the holy to affirm, ground, and animate our faith in this time of change.

In the sentence before Sunday's second reading, Paul describes how his protégé Timothy came to believe in Jesus. "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I'm sure lives in you" (2 Timothy 1.5).

Like this mother and grandmother we hand on the faith we live for better and worse. I find my grandpa's words often in my mouth, "Will wonders never cease?" No was his answer and now mine. Wonders continue. What we believe becomes evident in our commitments, in the paths we follow, the persons we trust, the presence we discover inspiring our hopes.

● **What is faith in your experience?**

● **Why does so little faith go so far?**



GOSPEL

Jesus teaches about faith and discipleship.



APOSTLES: Increase our faith, Lord.

JESUS 1: If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.

JESUS 2: Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field—

MASTER: Come at once and sit down to eat.

JESUS 1: Would you not rather say—

MASTER: Prepare my dinner; put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink; afterwards you can eat and drink yourself.

JESUS 2: Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? It is the same with you. When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say—

SLAVES: We are worthless slaves. We have only done our duty.

Luke 17:5-10

Auschwitz. Wiesel lost his faith in the flames burning dead children in the pits he saw the night he arrived. “Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.”

When SS troops put to death a child so light in weight he hanged for a half hour before he died, Wiesel heard a man ask, “Where is God now?” Deep within, Wiesel heard a voice, “He is hanging here on this gallows.” God seemed gone.

Fifty years later Elie Wiesel wrote a prayer for the Jewish New Year. It begins, “Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?”

“What about my faith in you, Master of the Universe?” Wiesel asks and responds, “*I now realize I never lost it, not even during the darkest hours of my life. I don’t know why I kept on whispering my daily prayers, and those one reserves for the Sabbath, and for the holidays, but I did recite them, often with my father and, on Rosh HaShanah eve, with hundreds of inmates at Auschwitz.*”

“Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? ...At one point I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came down ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men, implemented by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but you as well. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven’t you also suffered?”

What power does faith have?

Luke groups four wise Christian sayings together in 17.1-10; the last two form Sunday’s gospel. The first saying declares that disciples are better off at the bottom of the sea with a millstone around their necks than to be a scandal. The second insists disciples must forgive one another seven times a day.

Third, faith the size of a mustard seed can uproot trees. Fourth, like Jesus, disciples have a duty to serve rather than expect to be served. Together the four sayings create a composite picture of the ideal Christian, one who is for real, forgiving, faith-filled, and committed to service, not status.

Jesus’ saying about faith insists that faith can command a sycamore to be uprooted from the ground and replanted in the sea. Why transplant a tree into the sea? It will die.

The saying exaggerates to make a point. Faith can do the impossible. Faith can move mountains. Matthew and Mark have versions of this same familiar saying but not the senseless twist of transplanting a tree where it will die.

Perhaps the disciples want to test or to show off what God can make happen. We too want to uproot every danger from the paths of those we love, to heal their every ill, transplant every pain, move seemingly immovable biases out of their way.

● What mountains do you pray to move?

Faith can waiver when our prayers to God go unanswered. Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel describes in his book *Night* his experiences of

The Holocaust has led many theologians to see God with us in our evolving world rather than over us as an all-powerful being whom we doubt in the face of such horrors. Christians see in Jesus that God comes among us to walk with us and struggle with us. Jesus does not exempt himself from death but struggles through conflict and pain to new life. As humans, we are free to destroy but also free to co-create the future with God through love.

- How have unanswered prayers tested your faith in God?
- Why does the child's death destroy Wiesel's faith in God? What sustains and revives his faith? How does who God is change for Wiesel?
- What has deepened your faith?

Jesus' fourth saying, the second in Sunday's gospel, touches on questions Luke explores throughout his gospel: Who can eat at Jesus' table? What is sharing a table with Jesus all about? Who gets what places? Who serves and who eats?

Jesus is often a guest in people's homes during his long journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51—19.28). He eats with everyone and anyone. Eating, hospitality, and care for the poor are major themes in Luke.



Pope Francis at Auschwitz.

The master in Sunday's gospel does not invite his slave to sit down to eat and drink with him after a long day out plowing. Rather, the master treats the slave as an inferior who can eat only after serving his master's meal. The parable cautions Jesus' disciples not to become status-seeking masters themselves, but to see themselves as slaves with the duty to serve like their master Jesus. Service is the ordinary duty of Christians.

In our time when we have abolished slavery and staunchly defend the equal dignity and rights of every human person, Sunday's saying rubs against the grain. We are used to hearing the Greek word *doulos* translated *servant* rather than *slave*. In fact,

most servants in Jesus' time were slaves.

Luke's gospel elsewhere includes a contrary parable that pictures a master serving his slaves. "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them" (Luke 12.37). This is Jesus' own model; he comes to serve rather than be served.

Jesus' willingness to eat with sinners, poor people, women, fishermen, and Pharisees challenges us to recognize that social, gender, and racial inequalities are not part of the God-given, natural order. They are our human creation and, therefore, our responsibility to change. From God's point of view as creator of all, black lives matter. Jews and people of all faiths matter. All lives matter.

- What service do you consider the ordinary duty of Christians?
- Who joins with you at your family table?
- Who will you serve this week?

CHARITY

JUSTICE

DO SOMETHING

Serving our neighbors means we act in charity and for justice. Charity is about responding to people's immediate needs—serving a meal at a shelter, stocking a food pantry. Justice identifies ways to work for systemic change with national or international organizations. For example, visit Bread for the World to explore ways to work to end hunger. bread.org.

What but faith can sustain us?

The prophet Habakkuk, whose words we read in Sunday's first reading, laments tumultuous years of war that end in Israel's defeat and destruction. These years of violence test Israel's faith.

The Assyrians become the superpower in the ancient Near East in the eighth century B.C. In 612 B.C., the Babylonians defeat the Assyrians and capture their capital city. With the Assyrians defeated and the Babylonians busy establishing their power at home, Egypt marches north.

Israel fights the Egyptians but loses in 609 B.C. The Babylonians defeat the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 B.C. Jerusalem surrenders to the Babylonians, but a rebellion against them leads to the destruction of the city and temple in 587 B.C.

Habakkuk laments the threatening times, the distressing violence, and God's seeming silence in response to prayer for help. Habakkuk's words in the first part of Sunday's reading speak poignantly of people's pain in war. Even in such cataclysmic times, Habakkuk envisions faith in God as the only possibility for life. The vision he writes down and claims will not fail is faith: "the just in their faith shall live."

Habakkuk prays a vision.

Then how long, O Holy One?

I cry for help

but you do not hear.

I cry out to you, "Violence,"

but you do not come to my aid.

Why do you let me see harm?

Why must I look at distress?

Violence and wrong

are before me;

there are lawsuits and quarrels.

Then the Holy One answered me

and said: Write the vision

clearly upon the tablets,

so one can read it aloud fluently.

For the vision still has its time,

it will produce; it will not fail.

If it delays, wait for it;

it will surely come,

it will not delay.

The rash person has no integrity;

the just in their faith shall live.

Habakkuk 1.2-3; 2.2-4

● **Where, who, or what is your source of stability in good times and in bad?**

● **What is your vision for our world, our country? Your neighborhood?**

PRAY

Spend a few moments surfacing concerns that the discussion has brought to your heart and mind. Share any of these you wish with the group.

LEADER: We believe in Jesus, who calls us to continue his mission in our world.

ALL: He calls us to live our faith, to heal and mend, to forgive and set free.

LEADER: (*Touches eyes; asks all to follow.*) Bless our eyes for seeing the beauty in creation and the ugliness in poverty and pollution that doesn't have to be.

ALL: May our love give life.

LEADER: (*Touches ears; asks all to follow.*) Bless our ears for listening to those different from us.

ALL: May our love give life.

LEADER: (*Places hand on heart.*)

Bless our hearts for welcoming people of every kind into our circle.

ALL: May our love give life.

LEADER: (*Extend left foot, then right.*) Bless our left feet for the work of charity, providing the food, shelter, education, and health care people need. Bless our right feet for the work of justice, changing the systems and public policies that keep people down.

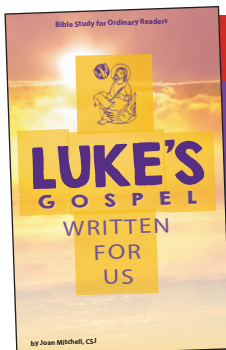
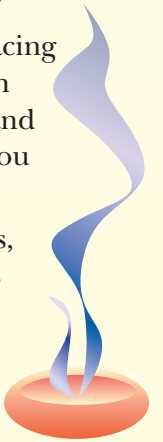
ALL: May our love give life.

LEADER: (*Extend right hand, then left.*) Bless our right hands for loving our families, friends, and neighbors. Bless our left hands for loving our enemies.

ALL: May our love give life.

Amen.

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Gather a Bible Study

We hear a passage from Luke's gospel every Sunday until Advent. Sister Joan's new book is a short and easy-to-use overview of Luke's gospel. Ideal for bible study and faith-sharing groups who want to dig deeper into Luke. Read sample chapters at goodgroundpress.com.

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