

[Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 95; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14;6:11-16; Luke 17:5-10]

In recent years, celebrity poker games from Las Vegas have become popular on TV. The famous and well-to-do gamble with somebody else's money. The winner has a big donation made in their name to a charity of their choosing.

The drama occurs when a bet forces a player to bet all of his or her chips. That means they'll win a large hand or be out of the game completely. If you watch it long enough, you learn that it's easy to bet everything when you have a great hand, much harder if you are struggling. Or if you think your opponent is bluffing, you have a tough decision to make. But quite often, skill has nothing to do with the outcome. Everything depends on the draw of the cards.

We have done nothing in and of ourselves to deserve the faith that God has given us. It is a true gift and blessing from God. We are supposed to play the hand that we are dealt. The prophet Habakkuk cries out for more faith even though he has enough. The apostles ask for an increase in faith, and Jesus tells them that they have more than enough.

When the chips are down (so to speak), do we believe our faith is strong enough to win or do we back off, asking for more? It is precisely when we are "all in" and place our trust in God that our faith makes us winners, no matter the outcome. **NO MATTER WHAT THE OUTCOME!**

"How long, O Lord? 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."

Who is the speaker in today's First Reading? A parent whose child is dying of cancer? A wife awaiting the return of her husband from a fourth military deployment? An elderly person who keeps reading about school or workplace shootings? A young person who is afraid that the next terrorist act is just around the corner? The prophet Habakkuk wrestles with the questions of violence and injustice of his time as we lament ours. Why does evil occur right before God's eyes? Why does God not prevent or at least erase the evil done? If God cannot do anything about it, Habakkuk says, spare us who have to look at it!

Later, when God responds to the prophet's questions, it is not with answers or solutions. It's with a promise. A promise of deliverance and restitution. Six times after today's First Reading excerpt, God promises that the vision will be fulfilled. But it will take faith and patience to reach that day. God encourages us to wait in faith.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul exhorts the young bishop Timothy and his people to keep the faith in the face of difficulty. Note that once again, St. Paul writes these words while sitting in a dungeon in a prison. Only the endurance of suffering can embolden us to the point of inviting others to embrace it. What circumstances in YOUR life could give you that audacity? What trials have helped you grow in patience and in faith?

How different would your faith be if simply arriving at Mass this morning, simply being in this church for Mass, could cost you your life? That is the price our Christian brothers and sisters are paying in the Middle East, in India and in Africa. Even in select towns in our own country. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that in the last decade, 100,000 Christians died for simply being Christian.

In their homes, in their schools, in their hospitals, and in their churches. That's eleven Christians per hour. Violence. Destruction. Discord.

According to the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt, Germany, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed not against Muslims, not against Jews, but against Christians. How do we react to those numbers, that reality?

It seems that our own country no longer defends us and our religious freedom; we are placed in the same situations as our Christian, Catholic brothers and sisters in the Middle East, India and Africa. Only we are not being attacked with bombs and bullets; we are being attacked from within by anti-religious government executive orders, legislation and judicial decisions.

We can become frustrated, apathetic and numb to all of this sin, this evil.

We also realize that our nation one day will be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable. Evil wins when good people do nothing. What CAN we do?

In the pastoral letter to Timothy, a church leader is reminded that the flame of the Spirit is already given to the Church. We don't have to wait on anything to make us more prepared to do what God calls us to do in this world.

The power is available, the love is within us, and self-control is the discipline that guards and guides its progress. But it's important to recall that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not an exercise of our puny wills. (Ask the Twelve Step crowd how "Higher Power" works.) These attributes are gifts from God sitting on our doorstep ready for action. All that remains, is for us to plant our seed of faith into the soil of the world and begin the cycle of growth and new life.

One seed is all we're given. And one seed is enough. But any gardener knows that a seed that is not planted will not produce anything. That's why the Church encourages us to make an *act* of faith, a *choice* for faith, a deliberate bow of the will to God. After that, you might want to duck. Flying trees can be a hazard, and you never know where they'll end up.

In Sunday's first reading, Habakkuk offers a remedy: Wait on the Lord. He says that those who fail to focus on the Lord will inevitably lack integrity. They're like people looking at themselves in a shattered mirror. Their lives are fragmented and disconnected. It may seem hard to wait -- in prayer, meditation, or simple awareness. Yet Habakkuk promises that God "will not disappoint."

St. Paul tells Timothy, and he says to US: Stir into flame the gift of God. God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony as a Catholic with a well-formed and informed conscience.

And we'll say, as the servants in today's Gospel parable do, "No big deal: we obey because that's our job." It's also, we might add, our joy and our pleasure. AMEN!