

When have you felt helpless in the face of evil? How's that for a big question to start with? I'll tell you about a time I felt helpless: I was in Israel with my friend Thomas. We were driving from Jerusalem up to the Sea of Galilee, and that trip takes you into the disputed territory known as the West Bank (because it's the West Bank of the Jordan). Though the area is controlled by the nation of Israel, it's inhabited largely by Palestinian Arabs. Because the Israeli-Palestinian relationship is so contentious, the Israeli government has established a checkpoint as you enter and leave the West Bank. And sure enough, as Thomas and I approached the checkpoint, some machine-gun toting soldiers waved our car over to the outpost building.

Once they saw our American passports, the process was relatively painless. We went through a process much like TSA security at the airport - they put our suitcases through an X-Ray machine and inspected our car. But that's not what made me feel helpless.

Behind our car was a minivan carrying a Palestinian family - a mom and dad and their two kids, who couldn't have been more than 7 years old. They too were waved to the side, but they had no American passports to expedite the process.

I watched as the parents were separated from their screaming, terrified children. I watched as they were searched while soldiers with guns watched, while more soldiers didn't x-ray their luggage, but carelessly unpacked and examined. As Thomas and I were dismissed, to toss our bags back in the trunk and leave, we saw the soldiers begin to crawl over every inch of their minivan.

And we could do nothing, as this family on vacation, or maybe visiting relatives, was disrupted, terrified and intimidated. I had heard how cruel Israeli soldiers could be, but here I was witnessing it first-hand. Protected from it all by my American passport, I stood by helpless as a father was emasculated in front of his terrified children, as a mother was humiliated by soldiers she'd never know.

Thomas and I drove away deeply disturbed, unable to talk about what we'd witnessed. By that point we'd been in Israel long enough to know what we'd just seen wasn't an isolated incident. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is long and bloody, and neither side is wholly innocent. As a priest who's lived in the Holy Land a long time told me,

"Israel is right and Israel is wrong. Palestine is right and Palestine is wrong. And they both have blood on our hands."

What Thomas and I observed that night on the banks of the Jordan River was a manifestation of a huge, towering evil that engulfed one small family as we stood by, helpless. We wanted to help, wanted to stop it, wanted to do something, but where do we start? How do two strangers, foreigners who don't speak either language, who have no authority, no power, how do we stand against something so terrible?

That's what I mean by feeling powerless in the face of evil. Feeling helpless when confronted with something that's far too big for you to even know where to start helping. That leads to the kind of paralysis Thomas and I felt... an inability to act, to do anything because you can't even imagine what could be done.

You don't have to travel overseas to feel that kind of paralysis. How many of us have been there as we contemplate the numerous problems in our own country, our own culture? If approval ratings are any

indication, it doesn't much matter who's in office, we don't think they're doing their jobs And no matter what the talking heads on your favorite news network say, voter-turnout demonstrates that most of us don't have the first clue how to go about fixing it all.

Or consider the terrible state of our education systems. Even as our test scores are plummeting compared to the rest of the world, we keep cutting funding, eliminating first extra-curricular programs, then the arts, and then teachers. The experts can tell us what we already know - that our educational system is broken, but they can't tell us how to fix it.

Or we could talk about immigration. Or the new wave of sex scandals sweeping through both the Catholic and Protestant churches. Or even simpler, how many parents don't have any idea where to start when it comes to helping their kids stay safe with technology. What's the right age to get a cell phone? How much should they watch TV or play on iPads? When are they old enough for Facebook or Instagram? And on... and on... and on...

[A good graphic would be some sort of HUGE, faceless black block and a very small person against it] What're we to do in the face of these huge, institutional evils? What do we do when the sheer largeness of the opposition makes anything we do seem pointless and small?

The good news for us today is that the people of God have often been up against the impossible or the immovable. We've often been confronted by seemingly impossible odds, and the answer we've found then is the answer for us now:

In the face of impossible odds and invincible evil, we do what we can.

Do what you can.

Pretty underwhelming, isn't it? No doubt you were expecting something big. Some sort of magic bullet solution that would unlock the key to feeling empowered and capable. A perspective that would help us rise up together and change the world, put an end to evil and silence injustice once and for all!

What I can tell you is we are called to do what we can.

Not helpful.

Right?

Apparently not. Not according to a man named Habakkuk. Habakkuk is one of the so-called Minor Prophets, a messenger God sent to his people when they were in the midst of tremendous political and religious turmoil. The prophets were to challenge, encourage and comfort God's people as they experienced upheaval and anxiety. Turn with me to Habakkuk chapter 2.

[Scripture slide] If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in our out of the pew in front of you, you can find Habakkuk on page XXX, and if you don't own a bible, please consider that a gift from us.

Habakkuk lived Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, in the decades leading up to Babylon's total destruction of Jerusalem and the gutting of Judean culture. Habakkuk lived among people who saw a

terrible evil looming on the horizon, crooked politicians, ineffective, out-of-touch religious leaders and they felt powerless to do anything about it, much like we often do today.

Judah itself was in bad shape. Habakkuk begins chapter 1 by complaining to God about the injustices he sees happening all around him, injustices perpetrated and enabled by corrupt institutions, both governmental and religious. He wonders how long God will allow this to continue.

In response, God tells Habakkuk about the coming devastation. God basically says he's going to use the evil Babylonian Empire to punish Judah for breaking their covenant with God. Because God's people refuse to act like God's people, God will allow Babylon to destroy them.

You can imagine Habakkuk's response: he's dismayed. That's like using a shotgun to swat a fly: effective but overkill. Besides, Babylon is *much* worse than Judah! How can that be just? How can we see God's goodness in the midst of such terrible devastation? And most importantly, how can good, faithful people survive such an apocalyptic disaster?

Habakkuk says as much to God, and God's response to Habakkuk is what I want to focus on:

"Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God." -- Habakkuk 2:4

"The righteous will live by their faithfulness to God."

That's God's solution. When the devastation comes, when you're the victim of forces far beyond your ability to control or even influence, do what you can. Be faithful to God. Don't abandon the covenant. Don't assume God has forgotten you or abandoned you.

Do the next right thing. Stay faithful. Do what you can.

This is the rallying cry of God's people throughout the Babylonian Exile and the centuries following. The early Christians, too, as they began to make sense out of the new life they'd received from Jesus, followed this same mantra. Do what you can. Stay faithful. Don't give up.

The first followers of Jesus faced opposition from nearly every place. Local governments tolerated them at best, but they were often jailed. Because they refused to worship the local gods, they were cast out of guilds and unions, suffered the loss of income. And because the Jesus movement was new, even the established religious institutions were against them.

The writer of the book of Hebrews addresses some of these early Christians who, because of the hardships they were facing - religious, political, economic and personal, were being tempted to abandon the way of Jesus, to return to their former religious practices. The author of Hebrews is encouraging them with the same words we heard Habakkuk preach - he literally quotes the verse we just read together.

Listen, beginning in verse 32 of chapter 10:

"Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and

were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things. You suffered along with those who were thrown into jail, and when all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew there were better things waiting for you that will last forever.

So do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you! Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.

'For in just a little while, the Coming One will come and not delay. *And my righteous ones will live by faith.* But I will take no pleasure in anyone who turns away.' But we are not like those who turn away from God to their own destruction. We are the faithful ones, whose souls will be saved." -- Hebrews 10:32-39

The writer of Hebrews isn't trying to deny reality. He's not pretending these early followers of Jesus aren't paying a real cost, that they're not victims of actual, identifiable evil. And he doesn't offer them some grand solution either. Instead, he quotes Habakkuk's advice: My righteous ones will live by faith (the writer was working from a Greek translation, so the wording shifted a bit).

His advice is the same: stay faithful. Don't give up. Just do the next right thing. But why? Because God's got this. You can't do much, but God can do everything. You don't have much capital, much influence, much power, but God is all-powerful. And God is working right now. God is restoring the world. God is putting an end to evil empires and crooked politicians and corrupt religious leaders. God is at work toppling oppression, pulling the powerful down from their thrones and rescuing victims of injustice.

And we are in the midst of all that. So the writer of Hebrews says, *Do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you! Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised*

What God promises us is nothing less than resurrection and new life, the new life Jesus gives us through his death and resurrection. We know a day is coming when God will speak the final word and Sin, Death and Evil will be no more. Until then, we live in a world of evil.

And we remain faithful. We don't allow our present circumstances to dictate our behavior. We live as people who have hope, not as a people of despair.

And that hope manifests itself in real, practical behaviors. We do the next right thing. We choose to act in practical, tangible ways, believing we don't act alone.

Mother Theresa is famous for having said, *No one can do great things. But everyone can do small things with great love.*

Small things with great love. Do what you can. Stay faithful. Don't give up.

And you'll be surprised what God does when you're not paying attention. That's how Feed the Creek blew up! Feed the Creek began as a dream when our Community Pastor Sharon learned that in Beavercreek, 1 in 8 kids is on government-subsidized meal plans at the Beavercreek schools. She knew that meant those kids almost certainly weren't eating on the weekends. Malnourished kids don't learn

well. Something as simple as a basic, balanced meal, something so many of us take for granted, especially here in Beavercreek, can derail a child's whole life, disrupting their chance for education from kindergarten on. Kids who don't eat well have worse behavior problems in addition to struggling to learn.

Sharon found some programs in other cities that provided backpacks full of easy-to-prepare food to kids for them to take home over the weekend. But 1 in 8 kids? That's hundreds of kids, just in Beavercreek. Sharon recruited Alice Webb and a few other people, but even that small group faced a Herculean task. But they did what they could. They reached out to other churches; few responded at first. They turned to Beavercreek businesses. A few more responded. So Sharon, Alice and their team started in one elementary school. Feed the Creek was born.

[Feed the Creek logo] One school out of nine. A handful of hungry kids out of hundreds. But it was a step. A good step.

But then word began to spread. And a small team grew. More churches joined to help. More businesses started putting out collection barrels. More schools wanted the program.

One school became three. And then six. And now eight. A handful of kids became 280 in the next few days, as school starts back up.

Feed the Creek outgrew the house it was working out of, and the Kettering Medical Network gave Feed the Creek a huge, free building because *they* don't want kids to go hungry either.

Who could've imagined, three years ago, that 280 kids in Beavercreek won't spend weekends hungry, will show up on Mondays full, alert and ready to learn? Who would've believed Feed the Creek would've become a rallying point for the whole community, uniting churches and businesses and kids and parents all around the rallying cry that Kids deserve to eat!

I'll tell you who: God knows. Because God didn't create a world in which kids go hungry. We did that. And God is working to bring an end to hunger in our world.

But when I think about how many kids in the world go hungry every day? I get paralyzed. I think, "There're too many! There's no way I could ever fix it!"

But it's not up to me to fix it. God is fixing it. It's up to me to follow Sharon and Alice' examples. To do the next right thing, even if it's small, even if it seems to be an impossibly small drop in a terrifyingly big bucket. Not because it's going to change the world, but because *it's the right thing to do*.

Because this is not a heroic act. It's not going to save the world. It's an act of faithfulness. A demonstration that I trust God to save the world, and I just join in.

The righteous live by their faithfulness to God. I do the next right thing and trust God will work the miracles. From feeding hundreds of kids, to the final resurrection.

So what's the next right thing for you? As you look around our world, what do you see that needs to be fixed? What do you see that's deeply wrong, that screams out to you THIS IS NOT HOW IT SHOULD BE?

How can you do something, however small, in defiance of that? Maybe it is Feed the Creek - they can always use volunteers to pack or deliver the backpacks, to pick up, inventory and stock food donations, and more.

But maybe God is calling you to something else. Something crazy. Something that reaches into the core of your soul and both excites and terrifies you and you haven't been moving on it because you can't imagine how it could possibly make a difference.

DO it. Making a difference isn't up to you. That's up to God. All you're responsible to do is the next right thing. So stop waiting. Start doing. And prepare to be amazed what God will do when you are faithful.

Communion Set Up

[Communion Slide] I can't emphasize enough that we are only able to be faithful because God was first faithful to us. We can act in confidence because God has already acted on our behalf. Not only did Jesus die to rescue us from our sin, God also raised him from the dead as proof that if we follow God, no matter how dark the night gets, dawn always comes. Resurrection is the signed, sealed and delivered guarantee to everyone who is faithful to God.

And this Communion Table represents that for us. This table represents the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he died. The night before *his* faithfulness to God cost him his life. Is there a bigger enemy than Death itself? But that night, Jesus broke bread and gave it to his disciples as a picture of his body broken for their sinfulness. We take a wafer to represent the same - our sin, our complicit participation in the evils of the world.

Later in the meal, Jesus gave his followers a cup of wine to represent his blood poured out to establish a new covenant with God. We dip our wafers in grape juice to remember that Jesus did all the work for us. He gave us a new life made possible through his death and resurrection.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive this communion. If you are willing to take the next right step, to trust God with your future, then you're welcomed to this table.

I'm going to pray, and then as you are ready, you may come forward to receive Jesus' meal.

Benediction

Feed the Creek open House TODAY 2-4 pm

3095 Dayton/Xenia Rd (just past Kroger)