

Harvesting Light [OR The Church on a Road Trip]

Luke 17:5-10, Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on October 2, 2022

This was the text from Ruth Ann: “Would you like to drive together?”

My mind said: Road Trip!!!

My text said: Yes! Let’s do it. I’ve not yet registered. Should we go for it?

We were texting at the beginning of August about our annual Rocky Mountain Synod Theological Conference scheduled mid-September. Pastor Ruth Ann was one of the pastors during my internship at Bethany and we’ve been roommates for colleague gatherings ever since. A road trip to the latest one in Utah was perfect for catching up on the way there and for debriefing on the way home. It was marvelous! So were the snacks – snacks being the foundation of any great road trip. Theological Conference was about trauma and resilience in faith communities. Worship and lectures focused our hearts and minds on faith and the topic of trauma and resilience. There was a lot of ground to cover - another kind of road trip (although Ruth Ann and I had waaay better snacks). I’m not interested in turning this time into a scientific lecture, nor do I have the expertise to pull it off, so I won’t. Suffice it to say that there are many layers to trauma in both our individual and collective experiences of it and the ways we make our way through it. I AM interested in our faith community’s, our congregation’s, experience of faith when trauma seems to be piling on.

Habakkuk was a prophet in the before-before-before times. Before now. Before Jesus. Before the return of the Jews from exile to the Holy Land. He lived and wrote while the people of God were conquered and taken away to Babylon. He seemed to understand the overwhelm of trauma. Habakkuk’s desperation is in his opening words:

²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

³Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

Suffering overwhelmed the prophet. So did the suffering of his people. He couldn't figure out God's place in it and demanded an answer. Thousands of years later, there remains no explanation for suffering other than it is sometimes the intentional violence we do to each other, known or unknown by us. The violence can be physical or emotional or spiritual. Suffering is sometimes accidental. And suffering is sometimes natural disaster. All we know for sure is that suffering and trauma are part of the human condition. It's so much a part of the human condition that God knows suffering personally in Jesus' death on the cross and, through Jesus' suffering, God knows our suffering personally too. Such is God's promise to us in our baptism to always be present even, and maybe especially when we don't feel it. When times are dark. When hope feels lost. Those are the times when is present with us. The churchy word for that is the Theology of the Cross.

One of the things we say is that baptism plunges us through Christ's death into Christ's resurrection. Baptism is a daily promise from God, not a once and done. Daily we die and rise into new life. Daily God catches us up into the promise. As people drawn together through the waters of our baptism and called the church, we are formed by God's grace to be present with each other in whatever we bring to the mix. We are a church of the cross as much as we are a church of the resurrection. Sometimes that means holding the space and time for someone's spirit to heal from trauma. Like with the Grief Group starting today. Or like quietly worshipping in the pew week after week after week, hearing God's promises for you while your spirit heals. Even as we celebrate the Harvest of Light today, we know that each of us has varying capacity on any given day, or during any given season of life, to be part of the baptismal action of reaching out to neighbors and volunteering in community groups.

It's one reason why the apostles' demand is so interesting. "Increase our faith," they say to Jesus. Notice they say, "Increase OUR faith." They say it as a group. Jesus replies to them as a group. In the Greek, Jesus uses the plural "you" that means "all y'all." I don't know who would need to move a mulberry tree into an ocean but it's more possible with a team of folks working together than with one person. This gets back to capacity. Kind of like with the Apostle's Creed. You may struggle with the idea of, oh, I don't know, resurrection of the dead, but be totally cool with God as creator of heaven and earth. While I might have the opposite

struggle. Between us, we have the capacity to say the Creed together. That's more of a top layer example of faith as an "all y'all" experience.

The Harvest of Light from our Summer of Service volunteering is another layer of our baptism as an "all y'all" faith moment. Those 1,522 hours barely scratch of surface of the ways we reflect the light of Christ in the world to God's glory. Not everyone who volunteers is going to write it down on a worship slip of paper. And not every action that shines Christ light is a volunteer hour. Many times we don't even know how the Holy Spirit is impacting another person through our actions. So much of it is a mystery.

We're encouraged to trust the Holy Spirit, just like Timothy was encouraged in the letter read a few minutes ago. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can trust God's good news of grace given in Christ Jesus before the ages began – the original (OG) Before Times.¹ Trusting in God's grace doesn't negate or minimize suffering or the experience of being overwhelmed by it. Trusting in God's grace means that we're given a community of Christ to share each other's burdens as we have the capacity to do so. It also means admitting when something is beyond our capacity, and we need help.

One of my top favorite parts of the baptism, after the water part of course, is the promise that all y'all make on behalf of God's whole church. I'm going to go ahead and use Cyrus as an example for this one since he'll be baptized this morning in just a bit. The part that I'm talking about goes like this, "People of God, do you promise to support Cyrus and pray for *him* in *his* new life in Christ?" It's a great question with a great answer when everyone replies, "We do!" The promises that we make as people are imperfect by definition, but it's powerful to set the intention to show up for each other, however imperfectly. Just like being honest about suffering, it's good to keep us honest about what binds us together as we road trip through the world.

Thankfully, at the end of the day, and at the end of our baptismal journeys, it's God's promises that are steadfast. Our identity as baptized children of God fuel our actions. Actions that bring glory to God in heaven. But it's God's faithfulness, God's grace in action, that we continue to proclaim from here to kingdom come. Thanks be to God. And amen.

¹ OG is slang for original.