Psalm 137, which I read a few moments ago, has fascinated me for years. I knew it first through musical treatments: the traditional American rendition made popular for the folk-rock crowd of the early 1970s by Don McLean, which we sang at the beginning of the service, and the equally beautiful and moving arrangement written by Stephen Schwartz for Godspell, "On the Willows." Both of those songs use only the first few verses of the Psalm, focusing on the sense of grief that they convey so well. It wasn't until I'd been listening to and singing those songs for years that I really confronted the last half of the Psalm and particularly the last 3 verses. Then I began to wonder, why would such dreadful thoughts be included in sacred scripture? How does this witness of murderous rage fit in with the devotional yearnings and praise of the rest of the Psalter? The vengefulness of the Psalm, the despair of Lamentations and Habakkuk, all have something to teach us this morning. But it is only in taking those thoughts in context of the whole message of those books and the greater context of the story of Israel and the Church that we can see clearly the purpose that these rather disturbing images and ideas play in the formation and maturation of our faith.

First, I believe scriptures like Psalm 137, the book of Lamentations and the first chapters of Habakkuk uphold the importance of the grieving process. Americans in general and American Christians in particular are not very good at grieving. Americans today, like the British of the late 19th century, seem to have bought wholeheartedly into the concept of the stiff upper lip. It fits right in with our "pull yourself up by your bootstraps, never say die" culture. Grief is an embarrassment, a weakness; although the news media is certainly adept at revealing our horrified fascination with grief, as witness the coverage this week of the airplane crash that killed 9 local skydivers and their pilot. American Christians add to this problem with an often facile "happy talk" that is prevalent in grief situations. Yes, it is true that our deceased loved ones are "in a better place," and it is true that "we are all in God's hands" and etc.., but over-reliance on these simplistic platitudes, no matter how true, does not relieve us from our need to grieve. I know first-hand the danger of burying the natural grief process under the weight of expectations that the faithful Christian will see the glory of God in everything. My own experience of short-circuiting the grieving process following my mother's death when I was 17 made me look like a model young Christian during the days around her funeral, but I paid a heavy price in emotional dysfunction and misplaced anger and self-destructiveness for months, indeed years, later. Of course it is possible to proclaim God's love in the face of tragic loss but first we must feel free to grieve, to weep, to mourn, to shout out against circumstance, illness, perpetrators and even God. Anger and sadness, as we know from the influential work of Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, are an integral and important part of the grieving process. To deny them is to deny our own human nature, created and blessed by God.

It is important in our grief and our anger over injustices to feel able to question God. Habakkuk's cry of "how long?" is matched many times in the Scriptures by other writers. At least 9 of the Psalms contain that desperate query. The prophets Jeremiah and Zechariah both cry out "How long, O Lord?" as they contemplate the suffering of God's people. Strangely, those words are best known, to me at least, in modern literature from the pens of two authors who are at best unsure of the existence of the One whom they question. Hunter S. Thompson, the father of Gonzo Journalism upon whom Garry Trudeau based the "Uncle Duke" character of "Doonesbury", often resorted to asking "How long, O Lord, how long?" in his jaundiced but curiously romantic view of late 20th century America. And the now more respectable agitator,

George Bernard Shaw, gives his "Saint Joan" this last speech: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?" Those modern doubters are unafraid to question God but there is no questioning the faithfulness of Israel's prophets. They understand in a way we sometime seem to have forgotten that questioning is not an act of unbelief but rather an act of the most profound belief. We must, as Edgar says at the end of Shakespeare's great tragedy, "King Lear," "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Dennis Bratcher, a scholar and minister of the Church of the Nazarene, puts it this way: "Questions may be the highest form of praise, because the questioners are willing to take life under God seriously." The witness of Habakkuk, the psalmists, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and even Job suggests that part of faithfulness to God is being ready to wrestle with God metaphorically, spiritually or intellectually, as Jacob is said to have done physically. That is how we learn about God most deeply, not by reading a book, even the scriptures, or by attending a class or by hearing a sermon (although I hope you'll keep listening) but by engaging in the search for God's reality for ourselves. Our faith cannot grow unless we are honest about our doubts. Just as we must give ourselves permission to grieve with honesty, so we must allow ourselves to ask questions, tough questions, of God. Bratcher continues his comments on Habakkuk by writing, "Sometimes the ability, or permission, to voice the questions is far more important than the answers, because it is in the context of the questions that the new vision of God comes!"

We have not suffered the pain of exile that the psalmist suffered but we have certainly all known profound grief in our lives. We may be more able to understand the situation of Habakkuk, who bore witness to the injustice and violence of his society, for certainly we live in a violent world and one in which it often seems that justice must take second place to profit. We may recoil in horror from the finale of Psalm 137, for we know the ultimate cruelty of the vanquished allowed to run rampant over their perceived tormentors – how the defeated Germans after World War I allowed themselves to be convinced that Jews and Gypsies and Communists and homosexuals were to blame for their defeat and the result was holocaust; how in Rwanda, the majority Hutus rose up against their Tutsi cousins who had been installed in power by Belgian colonizers and created a genocide which still haunts central Africa. When we read the end of Psalm 137, we understand that to destroy a nation's children is to declare ethnic cleansing and we may think of the terrible events in the former Yugoslavia in the last decade or of the unspeakable acts still going on in Darfur or, if we are willing to look back into our own nation's history, incidents like the slaughter of Native American women and children at Wounded Knee. But God is not given voice to answer the psalmist. In the midst of profound anguish, the exiled poet cannot hear God; he doesn't expect to experience Yahweh in a foreign land. Habakkuk keeps watch for the Lord's response to his complaint and he is answered. The proud, the perpetrators bring their own end upon themselves. God's people are called to remain faithful.

"Look at the proud!" That is God's word to Habakkuk. "Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith." Their spirit is not right in them. I'm reminded of an old turn of phrase from Texas and the South that was part of a wonderful bit of humor in a play I once directed called "Greater Tuna." In it, the rather nasty-spirited Vera Carp observes her friend Bertha Bumiller's peculiar and anti-social son, Stanley, turns to Bertha, shakes her head sadly and says, "Bertha, that boy's not right." The proud aren't right. Dennis Bratcher points out that the Hebrew word in Habakkuk, translated here as "right," generally translates as to be straight, or to be healthy. Perhaps, he suggests, the verse might be translated, "Look at the Proud! They are

deathly sick." They are full of death, intending death towards others, destroying the true life in themselves. Vengeance, personal or corporate, is unnecessary. They have sown the seed of their own destruction within themselves. Robert Palmer, a poet of the early 20th century, reflected on the terrible nature of vengeance and the words of Habakkuk:

How long, O Lord, how long, before the flood
Of crimson-welling carnage shall abate?
From sodden plains in West and East, the blood
Of kindly men steams up in mists of hate,
Polluting Thy clean air; and nations great
In reputation of the arts that bind
The world with hopes of heaven, sink to the state
Of brute barbarians, whose ferocious mind
Gloats o'er the bloody havoc of their kind,
Not knowing love or mercy. Lord, how long
Shall Satan in high places lead the blind
To battle for the passions of the strong?
Oh, touch Thy children's hearts, that they may know
Hate their most hateful, pride their deadliest foe.

Those whose hearts have been touched by Christ, who continue to walk in God's way, find life in faith or, better, faithfulness, for it is action inspired by belief that is meant here and not mere intellectual assent to a belief.

Our great example of faithful living, of course, is Jesus, who had plenty of questions of his own at the end, yet persevered through his passion with kindness towards others and forgiveness for his killers. He heals the ear of the soldier in the detachment that arrests him, prays for forgiveness for those who carry out the crucifixion, comforts the penitent thief. But we also know that he grieved his impending death in agony at Gethsemane and that among his final words were the anguished question, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As followers of the Christ, we are called to reject the destroyer, vengeance, and to take up whatever cross we encounter in our lives and walk with Jesus towards forgiveness. We may say "yes" to honest grief and to honest questions but we must remember that it is faithfulness in our living that will open up true life for us. Jeremiah, looking upon the shattered nation of Judah and lamenting, was able to affirm God's ultimate faithfulness, steadfast love, with new mercies every morning. So, too, must we be faithful to God who loves us by returning love for hate, life for death. "The righteous shall live by faith," God tells Habakkuk, and that good news became the core of the message that Paul sent to the very center of the Roman world. In the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, we read, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

The second Epistle to Timothy was almost certainly written to members of a Christian community that were experiencing persecution, likely a persecution as dreadful and deadly as anything known by Jeremiah or Habakkuk or the unknown psalmist of the exile. Paul, too, experienced danger, injury and the spectre of imminent death. Just as Jeremiah spoke of God's

faithfulness in Lamentations, so the epistle turns to the theme of God who stands by us in all situations. "For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him." Paul calls on Timothy and his flock to persevere in the face of terrible travail. "I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God bestowed when my hands were laid on you. The Spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving and wise. Therefore, never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord . . . but with the strength that comes from God, bear your share of hardship which the Gospel entails." To grieve, to question, and then to face our troubles with courage and with love, that is the spirit of true abundant life.

Living faithfully can make a difference in our world, even when, like Jesus' forgiveness of the thief on the cross, it may seem to the world like a futile gesture. Fr. John Kavanaugh, the Jesuit scholar of St. Louis University whose commentary is among those I read every week, tells this story: "There was a religious sister who was a midwife. She taught in a university and she practiced her profession in a city hospital. Into the hospital walked a lost, young teenager, many months pregnant, not even aware of the fact, but sick."

"'I've got news for you,' the midwife said. 'You're pregnant.' There was no boy or man who might claim the name of father, no family, no support group, no promise. As I recall, the young girl did not even know how or when she became pregnant, so meager was her knowledge of 'reproductive rights.'"

"The sister-servant promised the young mother-to-be that she would be there for her. Each week a visit could be made and lessons taught: how to eat properly and take care of a pregnant body, how to prepare for delivery, how to live. And each week, visits were made. After the novena of months passed, birth came. One new mother's child, with the midwife's guidance, was fed rightly, nursed and cleaned, cared and worked for."

"Then the young mother disappeared. She was gobbled up by this heartless world, lost in the maelstrom of this culture, the American dream, which for her and her child was a nightmare. She went defenseless before the pimps of pleasure and power. She vanished into the dangerous night."

"She was not heard from again," Kavanaugh reports, "until, I think, six years later, when in her early twenties she wrote a note to her midwife-mother. It was an invitation, the message now blurred in my mind. 'I am sorry I waited so long to thank you, but I wanted to surprise you. I wanted to be like you, since you were someone so good and loving.'"

"The invitation was to a graduation for Licensed Practical Nurses. Somehow, stronger than all the threat of violence and abuse, more appealing than any seduction of the moment, was the gift and promise of a person's witness."

"The good is like a frail fire," Kavanaugh writes. "It expends itself once it is lit, bringing light to those around. Even though slight, it can illuminate a big dark room, helping you make it to the

other side. Like love and wisdom, it lives in being communicated, being given. You just do not know how faith bears fruit. You just do not know how love lives anew."

In new birth, of a child, of a life gone awry, of a flower, or of our hearts, we see the creative, loving will of God. It is right for us in the face of death, tragedy or injustice, to grieve, to be angry, to ask hard questions. But grief and anger are not the final word. Through God's messengers in the Old Testament and through God's incarnation in Christ Jesus, witnessed and proclaimed in the New Testament, we hear that faithfulness, hope and love combine to reveal the final word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God's presence in our world, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is the promise of life for us, being fulfilled each day in the mercies of God, which are new every morning. Thanks be to God.