

“Growing in Knowledge”
Habakkuk 2:1-4,12-14/Luke 2:41-52

Five years ago, a book called *Proof of Heaven* became a best-seller. Written by Eben Alexander, a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon, it tells of how years earlier he survived a life-threatening bout with bacterial meningitis. Dr. Alexander fell into a coma and the book recounts what happened before and after including, what he understood to be a trip to heaven. In the book, he uses some bizarre imagery for the life to come, but I appreciated his account even so, both in its written form and when I heard him speak at a church in Germantown a few years back.

At one point in his memoir, Alexander speaks about the incredible knowledge that came to him during his time in heaven. “It will take me the rest of my life,” he wrote “and then some, to unpack what I learned up there. The knowledge given me was not ‘taught’ in the way that a history lesson or math theorem would be. Insights happened directly... Knowledge was stored without memorization instantly and for good. It didn’t fade... and to this day I still possess all of it, much more clearly than I possess the information that I gained over all of my years in school.

“That’s not to say that I can get this knowledge just like that. Because now that I’m back here in the earthly realm, I have to process it through my limited physical body and brain. But it’s there. I feel it, laid into my very being. For a person like me who had spent his whole life working hard to accumulate knowledge and understanding the old-fashioned way, the discovery of this more advance level of learning was, alone, enough to give me food for thought for ages to come...” (Alexander, Eben. *Proof of Heaven*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012, p. 49)

There are all kinds of ways we grow in knowledge. For that physician, it came through a Near Death Experience, but we don’t have to face such a life-threatening circumstances to receive, in his words, “food for thought for ages to come.” Instead, we can gain such insight as we continue to deepen our understanding of Scripture and what it tells us about our Creator.

Last Sunday, we began a time of reflecting on God’s call for us to grow. Such pondering undergirds our Flourish initiative, but the topic’s importance is much larger than that, as it is God’s intention for all of us keep growing in the fullness of life. Thus seven days ago, we pondered how God wants us to grow in offering and accepting grace. Today, we focus on God’s desire for us to grow in knowledge, turning to our two Biblical passages for insight.

The first is a reading from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. I suspect that is an unfamiliar part of Scripture to most of you and say that with no criticism as I have preached more than 1250 sermons in my years as a pastor, but this one marks the first time I have done so based upon any part of Habakkuk. So, let me offer some context for your and my sake.

The book is set in the seventh century B.C. when things were not good for the people of God. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen about a hundred years earlier and the Southern Kingdom of Judah would soon be overrun, too. The first deportation of Jews to Babylon was only a few years away, too, and in response to all that trouble Habakkuk used the first chapter of his book to complain, calling God to task for all of the bad things occurring to his people. The prophet then realized that if he was to bear God’s message to the Jews that he must have a word to offer from God. Thus in our reading from the second chapter, Habakkuk seeks knowledge.

“I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart,” the prophet begins. “I will keep watch to see what [God] will say to me, what he will answer concerning my complaint.” In response, God says “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.” God proclaims that “the righteous will live by their faith” and then names a succession of reversals that await those who are persecuting his people. We heard only a part of

the litany, but in the midst of naming punishment to come God speaks of a better day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

Our second passage recalls a time of deepening knowledge, too, in the only Biblical account of what happened to Jesus between the time of his birth and the start of his ministry decades later. Mary and Joseph had taken the 12 year-old Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover. When that festival ended, they began the trip back home accompanied by a large group of family and friends. The parents assumed their son was somewhere in the traveling party, but upon stopping after the first day realized he was not and frantically retraced their steps. Three agonizing days later they find him in the Temple, listening to the teachers of their faith.

Relief and anger collide as Mary exclaims “Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” In reply, their 12 year-old says “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Luke records that Mary and Joseph “did not understand what he said to them,” and then ends the scene by writing “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

The search for knowledge is rarely a smooth or even process. For Habakkuk, it came amidst painful events for his nation when after complaining that God was doing nothing to help, he received a word of promise describing what was ahead. For a young Jesus, deepening knowledge required that he begin to separate himself from his earthly parents. For Mary and Joseph, a couple who years earlier had responded to the message of an angel and shepherds, they experienced the hurt that came in seeing Jesus begin to claim his identity. Each of them had to grow in knowledge, supplementing what they already knew. We are no different.

Several years ago, a mom named Sara Flanary shared a conversation with her then four-year-old son “Lewis and I stopped by the elementary school,” she wrote, “to drop off the forms that would enroll him in kindergarten, [when] he saw his friend’s mother and was confused, having only seen her at his day care center. ‘Why is Austin’s mother here?’ he asked. I explained that she taught there. I went on to tell him that she had gone to college for special training so that she could teach school. As we went on to other errands we passed a power company truck and Lewis said, ‘So that man had to go to school to learn how to fix ‘lectricity?’”

“Lewis was into it,” Mrs. Flanary continued. “He wanted to know what the gas station man had to do to get his job, and how the milk truck driver learned to do his job, and the owner of his favorite restaurant. ‘Lewis,’ I said ‘you can be anything you want to be, a school teacher, a gas station man, a restaurant owner... I saw the question forming on [his] face. With all the sweet sincerity of his age, he asked ‘Can I be God?’” (*Presbyterians Today*, July/August 1997, p. 3). She doesn’t share her reply, but suspect Mrs. Flanary gently told her son that job was taken.

All of us, no matter what our age are called to keep growing in knowledge and the particular insight we need begins most naturally with Scripture. That was the starting point for a prophet who complained about the hardship befalling his people and for a twelve year-old seated in the Temple of Jerusalem long ago. For you and me, too, God seeks for us to faithfully study his Word, in private devotionals or group conversations. Thus, part of our growing knowledge comes from learning more and more of the Scripture. Yet it doesn’t stop there.

As God’s intention for us is the same as it was for Habbakuk and Jesus, for Mary and Joseph; namely that a regular encounter with the Bible causes us to grow in learning the ways and will of God. Jesus certainly embodied that reality in the most perfect form of all as decades after his time of being found in the Temple he appeared to John in the wilderness to begin his public ministry. For Jesus’ earthly parents, that deepening knowledge of God’s ways came

through life, including as she stood at the foot of the cross, grasping ever more completely God's will. For Habakkuk, it came when he learned that God would reverse all of the hardship in life and articulated the desire that the earth be "filled with the knowledge of the glory of God." Such outcomes always begin with hearing or reading of the Word, but do not stop there. Rather, the kind of growth God seeks has always been one when an encounter with Scripture leads us to grow in understanding the ways of God and in response to then act upon that knowledge.

Tuesday marks 500 years since a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was also a professor at the local university and attaching his list of disagreements with Catholic practices to a church door was the 16th century equivalent of a Facebook post as it was a kind of bulletin board to start a conversation or debate. Things moved quickly, however, when some of his students took the document and gave it to one who owned the latest technological invention—the printing press—and word spread. Thus, October 31, 1517 is often referred to as the birthday of the Reformation.

Without a doubt, Luther's act on that day set in motion the events that eventually brought us to this church and its Protestant tradition, yet years earlier there was another key moment for him that proved equally enduring for all of us, too. It occurred at the tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. While preparing a lecture on the book of Romans, Luther was still agonizing over whether he was saved or not. It all changed as he read one verse in Paul's opening chapter.

"When," Luther recalled "by God's grace I pondered in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, 'He who through faith in righteousness shall live [Romans 1:17]...I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won't be our merit but God's mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it's by the righteousness of God that we're justified and saved through Christ. These words [which had before terrified me] now became more pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower.'" (Tappert, Theodore G. ed. *Luther's Works: Table Talk*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, pp. 193-194) The verse Luther cited was Paul's interpretation of the line we heard from Habakkuk where God had said "the righteous live by their faith." Thus, the discovery in that tower led him to the revolutionary new idea that we are saved, not by works, but by faith, a key piece that would embolden Luther to nail 95 other points of objection to a church door.

It's likely that our moments of growing in knowledge will not launch the next Reformation, but you never know. At the very least, it will set us on that path toward which we have been called to journey still, drawing ever closer to that day "when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."