

Sunday, October 3, 2010: Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26 ; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

by [Kristin M. Swenson](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

This week's readings include sentiments that appall me: dashing children's heads against rocks; applauding the idea of Jerusalem as a woman abandoned and abused because she had it coming; accepting the idea of slavery and the "proper place" of inferiors. I cannot go where these texts would lead me. I will not follow them.

My reaction may seem unorthodox, even unchristian. How dare I blatantly and unapologetically reject God's word yet still identify myself as Christian? My defense leans on the texts themselves, on my faith in a living and loving God, and my belief that God has entrusted to us boundless powers of intellect, spirit and heart.

There is biblical precedent for challenging the word of God. To challenge God is not so much a rejection as a passionate embrace or a fierce clasp of tradition and authority. To challenge the texts is to engage with them. Our reaction of refusal and even disgust is evidence of God's power to continue a conversation that the texts have started.

Refusing to incorporate destructive ideas into the ways that we think and live, even when their source is the Bible, is to say yes to God, who is alive and at work in love in the world today. It is to acknowledge not only the dynamic and radically free character of a living God but also our own potential and power. It is to accept that we have been wonderfully made—inquisitive and intelligent, with capacity for sympathy and compassion, and invested with the spirit of God.

Consider Job. He didn't quietly accept the sufferings foisted upon him but railed against his friends and against God. He named the injustices and demanded explanation. He bore the burdens of grief, pain and humiliation, but under protest. He demonstrated a commitment to integrity—his own and what he understood of God too. In the end, God praised Job for speaking of what was right and true about God.

Consider Lamentations, with its grief articulated out of the chaos of great destruction and expressed in the voice of an unwavering faith desperately seeking

understanding. These are not platitudes or easy declarations of "everything's going to be all right." Lamentations is page after page of woe.

Then there's Habakkuk, a guy who observed terrible trials and the destruction of his people and place. He could not reconcile that depth of misery with the justice of God and wrestled to make sense of it, pitching his challenge to God and then waiting for God's response. These biblical voices are candid about letting God know when even God doesn't seem quite right.

But note how the texts turn from complaint to comfort, from grief to gladness, from anger to peace. Because it's a relief to hear happy thoughts, we readers quickly forget that happy thoughts have been hard won. They come only after complaint, after challenge, after the rejection of accepted theologies. The faith that leads us to refuse traditional authority gives way to relief that that is precisely where God wants us to be. God wants us to push back. Faith in a God who accepts our challenges with grace (and even invites and desires them) brings us comfort, hope and peace.

Habakkuk starts with complaint and the frank admission that the suffering he's observed does not seem fair, and he calls out to God for some kind of accounting. But he also observes that while the arrogant enjoy their superiority, they're deeply unsettled, while the righteous "live by faith." In the midst of complaint, the author of Lamentations confesses faith in the boundless new mercies of an unfailingly loyal God.

These texts are models of protest, even when the dispute is with God and what seems to be God's word. It isn't dissent for dissent's sake or for selfish purposes. Rather, the voices of protest that we hear in these biblical texts grow out of what those earnest people believe about God. The Psalm 37 poet acknowledges the reality of injustice and counsels patience, insisting that those who refuse to commit violence and who commit their lives to God will enjoy peace and place. With the authority of Paul, the author of 2 Timothy assures his audience that they are recipients of a great divine gift—"a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

I'm still working out the details, but it seems to me that that gift sometimes demands that we reject the very words of the Giver. When those biblical words undermine our capacity for goodness, compassion and our ability to work for the health of our world and all that's in it, then we must say no. Maybe that's exactly what God wants us to do.