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Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

2 Timothy 1:3-9a

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## A SPIRIT RISING

When I was a kid, I decorated my bedroom walls with posters of people carrying out two professions. Each morning when I woke up and each evening as I went to bed, I literally and figuratively looked up to NFL football players and astronauts when I dreamed about what I was going to be. Those were the two main vocational prospects for a ten-year-old named Kirby. However, the likelihood of becoming a professional football player did not fit very well with who I was, because I was among the smallest kids for my age. I had been one of the better players on my not-very-good YMCA 65-pounder team, but as I was so much smaller than the junior high and then high school football players when I reached those grades, football did not fit my physical frame. When I finally started growing in tenth grade, I was really just skin and bones, and would have gotten broken in half out on the football field with guys who were more than twice my weight. Likewise the prospect of becoming an astronaut did not fit very well with who I was because my stomach couldn't handle roller coasters, much less the rigorous physical training that astronauts went through. I had aspirations that were well beyond my grasp.

Timothy, who was the person addressed in the letter sent by the Apostle Paul, from which I just read, had been a young person when his spiritual mentor had laid hands on him praying for him to be able to carry out his calling from God. His grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice, had been instrumental in the faith growing within him. I'm pretty sure young Timothy did not have a poster with a picture of Paul on the wall of his bedroom, but there is every indication that the young man looked up to him as a faith hero. He had accompanied Paul on many of his visits to various churches located around the Mediterranean Sea. Timothy also gets mentioned as having been with Paul in six of his epistles addressed to various church locations. While writing Timothy, Paul was once again being held in prison for having proclaimed the faith. It wouldn't be long before he would be executed. I dare say that the young man must have felt that he did not have it naturally within

him to do what Paul had done as one who proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ far and wide. His stature compared with Paul's was about like mine compared with much larger football players. I imagine Timothy's stomach felt like mine on a roller coaster when he thought of the prospect of trying to fill Paul's shoes at whatever point the great church leader would no longer be around. Were Timothy's limitations too great for him to ever approach his aspirations?

Speaking of roller coasters, it has been that kind of year for many of us associated with Abington Presbyterian Church. 2020 has been a wild ride. Next Sunday, we will observe All Saints Day, giving thanks for twenty five people of our congregation who have died over the past year, but this will be a fresh reminder that going forward we will not have with us some who provided significant leadership in the past. If I focus just on the potential steep drop-offs as I look forward, the anticipation of hurtling down once again leaves me with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. It leaves me wondering whether we as a congregation have it within us to meet our aspirations for ministry. I'm frankly not sure that we do.

And yet, there is someone with us, who is the only One who knows what lies ahead for us, who equips us for whatever lies ahead. This is the One who Paul says did not give Timothy and him and you and me "a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." That verse led to our stewardship theme for 2021: A Spirit Rising. We do not know what lies ahead in the coming year, but the ways in which God has equipped us over this past year fills me with hope that is stronger than the butterflies in my stomach. I have already seen God's gift of a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline at work over these past months of pandemic and economic turmoil. During that time, such a spirit enabled us to transition to worshiping online with numerous upgrades along the way, and now we are moving toward a hybrid model of some of us worshiping here in person while others can still worship with us through live-streaming. At a point when we could not collect tithes and offerings in person, we were able to open up an online giving option to augment the many of you who have faithfully been sending in your financial gifts by mail. We began to carry out our meetings and our ministry continued in a whole new way through Zoom. We were blessed to be able to begin Rev. Jade's ministry among us as our new minister of congregational care as she

equips our care team and our deacons. We were able to move forward through your generosity with capital campaign projects that put a new much-needed roof on our Education building and we now have our elevator and accessibility ramps and doors so our facilities make this place a house of prayer for all people as God opens the way. We have a new website to be used by our congregation and by others to find spiritual resources which God enables here. And we have been true to our heritage of sharing as avenues were found to allow the Session to increase our support for our partners in ministry to feed and care for the increased numbers of folks in need. We have seen evidence of what Paul wrote about: a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline right here in our midst, by God's grace.

Our scripture reading from Habakkuk puts a challenge out to us. He was a prophet who lived at a time when he wanted to complain to God about the difficulties that people of faith had gone through during a time of devastation. But God answered his complaint with a call to action, which was for him to write the vision of what God was about to do in a large way, demonstrating a faith in a redemptive God.

During the season of Lent this past spring, just as we were shutting down public use of the building, large posters were hung on the sanctuary's interior walls of pictures of hands of people from this congregation. They were praying hands, they were hands that exhibited pain, but that were used to serve others. They were hands that gave of themselves, reaching out to others. They were older and younger hands that showed compassion and care. The posters are still there. I hope and pray that in the near future, just as I looked up at the posters in my bedroom long ago, you will be able to sit in the pews and look up at those hands that were artistically photographed by Alice Price. But until then, I hope you will look at your own hands and lift them up to God asking that you not be given a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline that would be exhibited through your hands. By God's grace, we can reach such aspirations. In the use of our hands, we can show there is indeed a spirit rising through our congregational ministry. Yes, we have certain limitations, but the God we serve does not. There is a spirit rising even through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.