

“If It Seems to Tarry, Wait For It...”

Habakkuk 1.1-4; 2.2-4; 3.17-19

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On this third Sunday of Advent we continue to listen to the Old Testament prophets, today turning to one of the minor prophets named Habakkuk. Unlike his contemporary Jeremiah whose book is a lengthy 52 chapters long, Habakkuk is a short one with only three chapters. But don't let that fool you! Even though it is a short book, Habakkuk has a lot to teach us about what it means to live as people of faith.

First, a little background: Bible scholars believe the prophet wrote around 605-604 BCE, a few years before the powerful Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar led an invasion of Jerusalem. Historians tell us the holy city was invaded in 597 and completely destroyed in 586 (Theodore Hiebert, [New Interpreter's Bible, Vol VII](#), p.626). You see, the prophet Habakkuk had lived through the attack of the Assyrians several years before, so he knew first hand about the chaos and violence of war. And when the Babylonians came to power, tough times became even tougher. After the brutal invasion, the survivors would be taken away to live in exile in Babylon. And this event created a major crisis of faith! The promises that God had made to Israel - that they would be given a land flowing with milk and honey, that they would be a great nation and be a blessing to all the nations of the world - all of these promises seem to be null and void. The holy city of Jerusalem, the place where people came to worship the Lord in the Temple - this place would be completely laid waste. The people would live in exile for generations, not knowing if and when they would return.

Much of the Old Testament is an attempt to wrestle with this crisis of faith, and this morning I invite you to wrestle with it as well. ***If God is a good and loving God and has made promises to us, what are we to do when these promises do not come to pass? What are we to do when instead of blessings and promises coming true, we witness tragedy and injustice, violence and suffering?*** I believe this is a question that we all face not only in terms of international conflicts like the ongoing war with Russia and Ukraine, but questions of suffering and injustice in our personal lives.

This morning, instead of reading all the scriptures at once, we will take them one at a time. Let us listen now to the words of the prophet, beginning with the opening verse of chapter 1:

Habakkuk 1.1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw:

O Lord, *how long* shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

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

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

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Have you ever been taught not to complain? Sometime during my childhood years, as I was parented by a mom and dad who had grown up during the Great Depression, I got the clear message that I was not to complain about things. Complaining was a sign of not being thankful. Complaining was a sign that you didn't appreciate all the good you had, compared to all the poor and suffering kids in the rest of the world. I wonder if any of you grew up with the message that complaints were bad.

But when we turn to the opening verses of the prophet Habakkuk, we hear something surprising. We hear words of complaint! The official word in the Bible for such complaints is lamentations - a call or lament directed to God about a certain situation that is not good. "*How long* O Lord shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? *How long* will I cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save us? *Why* do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? *Why* is there destruction and violence and conflict all around?! *Why* are the wicked surrounding the righteous, and justice is nowhere to be found?" While laments are found throughout the psalms they are almost never found amongst the prophets. But in giving voice to his complaint, Habakkuk is doing something very important. He is giving us permission that when we face injustice and suffering, when we face circumstances that lead us to question God's presence, to question God's ability to deliver on the promises made - the prophet is showing us that such honest speech to God is an effective and faithful form of prayer. Unlike what I learned from my parents, that voicing complaints is not a good thing to do, what we see in the scriptures is just the opposite. To live in a faithful relationship with God, we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves and honest with God - to be willing to share our anger and our grief. Such honest speech is not just cathartic, just to get things off of our chest. ***No, such honest speech is a sign that we trust God enough with our deepest pain and sorrow, that in this act of vulnerability we are admitting that we really have nowhere else to go but to God.***

We see this happen when Jesus is dying on the cross - after being abandoned by his closest friends, tried and convicted and sentenced to death - Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!"

Such honest speech is what we can do when we are facing the dark nights of our souls - when we have received a diagnosis that rocks our world; when a loved one leaves us way too soon; when violence and tragedy seem to be breaking the hearts of so many of God's children; when creation itself is groaning for redemption - such honest speech is what prayer looks like. It's the type of prayer we sang today in the hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel" from the forces that oppress her.

In light of the violence and oppression he witnessed, Habakkuk gives us a place where we are to begin - with an honest speech of lament. But like any real conversation, it has to go both ways. When we turn to chapter two we hear God's response to the prophet:

Habakkuk 2.2-4

Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.
Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faithfulness.

In these short verses Habakkuk receives an answer from the Lord. In almost like the formula of a riddle, we are told God will send a vision at the appointed time. It's a vision we should trust - a vision that speaks of the end and it does not lie. God promises to send a vision, but it is a vision that is not to come right away. "If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come." And though we aren't given any clues about the details of the vision, we are encouraged as we are waiting to walk in the ways of faithfulness.

In contrast to the proud who have a wrong spirit in them, the righteous are the ones who are able to trust in God even when the vision has not been made plain. And so when it comes down to what faith is all about, we are getting close to the heart of the matter, aren't we? In light of the suffering and injustice in our world - in light of the divisions we see separating nation from nation, family member from family member - in light of all the things that lead us to cry out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" - our calling is to walk by faith, not by sight. In Hebrews chapter 11 we are given the definition of faith as being "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11.1). If the prophet could immediately see the vision God promised, then where would faith come into play? Where would there be room for trust? If we were given answers in black and white to the problems we face, to the things that keep us up at night - where would our faith be? The type of trust described throughout the Bible is not the kind that operates on a simple formula - it's not the kind that guarantees security and material success, smooth sailing and no bumps on the road. No, the type of faith described in the Bible is an invitation to radical trust and deep joy, the type of trust and joy described in the closing chapter

Habakkuk 3.17-19

Though the fig tree does not blossom
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.

Presbyterian pastor Mark Ramsey has written ([*The Ministry Collaborative blog, November 9, 2021*](#)) that the little three letter word “yet” in this passage may be one of the most faithful words in all of scripture. The crops have failed, the fields have not produced anything, the storage bins are empty...and YET we will rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in God our Savior! This type of deep joy and faithfulness, the kind that is not contingent on our outward circumstances - this is what Biblical faith is all about. The scriptures tell us time and time again that our gratitude and joy should not be based on the external things that may be good one day and then bad the next. No, our faith should never be grounded in the stuff of life but rather our ultimate trust and loyalty should be placed in God alone.

In closing this morning, I invite you to consider with me the question of how we can encourage such faith in our own lives and in the hearts and lives of those we love. First of all, I want to offer my opinion that ***this type of deep trust is not something that can be bought*** - the answer is not in the latest book or podcast on spirituality. Faith is not something we can get by enrolling in a series of classes or by reading great sermons. Faith is not something I can give to the members of the confirmation class on a 8.5 by 11 piece of paper, though I have tried! ***No, I believe faith is something that is actually more caught than bought.*** We can catch faith when we see it enacted in those around us in community. We can catch faith when we listen to the stories of others who have walked the path of the righteous, willing to wait when the vision seems to tarry. It's in community, in the relationships we share with one another that we can catch the Spirit of faith.

Our confirmation class members have all been paired with sponsors - adults willing to listen and encourage and share their faith with class members. We might talk in class about the power of God's grace to save us, but it's another thing to see what grace looks like in the life of someone who has faced real challenges. And ministry with children and youth is not a one-way deal! We adults have a lot to learn from the faithfulness and commitment of our younger members. Yes, sometimes faith is more caught in relationships than taught in a classroom!

My friends, the season of Advent really is about learning how to practice our faith together. As we remember the coming of God in history, we wait for Emmanuel to come again - not just in the distant future but in the inbreaking of God's reign here and now. Whether it's in the carols we sing, the fellowship we share, the welcome we extend to strangers or the gifts we give one another, Advent waiting is never passive. It's the type of waiting that is courageous, willing to share our laments in the darkness and not to give up hope.

A wise person once said, ***“A candle is a protest at midnight. It's a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, ‘I beg to differ’”*** (Samuel Rayan). May we find the courage to walk in the ways of faithness even as we stand in the midnight dark.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.