

“Wait and See”

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

Message for October 23, 2022

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In choosing this text to focus on today, I realized that part of the attraction for me is that the book of Habakkuk reads much like a Psalm. In fact, it has so many elements that are found in the biblical psalms that many scholars have wondered whether the author was a member of the temple personnel. Just like our series on the psalms over the summer, which included psalms of lamentation, this first section of Habakkuk's prophetic book speaks to God from a frustrated and broken heart.

“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.” This passage from the prophet Habakkuk speaks powerfully to times of conflict, injustice, and violence – both in our personal lives (whether due to violence in our relationships, our homes, our work settings, or our immediate communities) and in our wider society and world.

The opening of the passage does not flinch from painful realities, but in the biblical tradition of lament and wholly argumentation with God, the prophet rails at God and demands an answer! Like the character Tevye in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Habakkuk plants himself squarely where God can see him – at a watch post high on a rampart wall – and has it out with God. Habakkuk's steadfastness – his faithful, watchful waiting – is then rewarded by a vision. In order for Habakkuk to “see” this vision of an end to injustice and a healing of grief, he stations himself in God's sight, suggesting that he is not going anywhere until he receives God's reply!

What gives him the persistence, even the *chutzpah* – the nerve – to confront God? The paradox of lament is that there is no lament without a foundation of faith. Grief, sorrow, despair can all exist alongside a void of faith, but argumentative lament presupposes that Someone is listening. Like the psalmist who repeatedly asks, “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13) Habakkuk's boldness suggests that he is no stranger to this holy debate. He believes that an answer will come, because he has had such experiences of consolation and clarity before. Ignatius wrote of the rhythm of

“consolation” and “desolation” that characterizes the spiritual life. In consolation we are drawn closer to God, while in desolation we find it more difficult to feel God's presence. In times of desolation, however, we are sustained by those times when we felt the movement of the spirit more clearly.

Catholic spiritual writer Edward Hayes recounts a story from the desert fathers and mothers, in which a young man goes to visit a wise hermit. He finds the monk sitting outside his cave, enjoying the sun, his dog lying lazily at his side. The seeker asks, “Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?”

The old man responds, “One day my dog and I were sitting here quietly in the sun, as we are now. Suddenly, a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across the creek, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit.

Confused, the young man asks, “What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for God?”

The hermit replies, “Why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? They had not seen the rabbit.” They were only attracted by the barking of the dog. But once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase. Seeing the rabbit, and not following the commotion, was what kept the old monk in the desert.

Once our heart's eye has seen God, if only for a moment – in the words of Paul's letter to the Ephesians – with “the eyes of [our] heart enlightened” – we are drawn to seek God forever. Something draws us to our place of worship, this gathered assembly of loving, struggling, beautiful, and flawed people, this font of blessing, this table that feeds us with God's love and promise.

Perhaps what draws us is not something we can articulate clearly. Sometimes it feels as if darkness overcomes our vision, and sometimes the

sheer silence of God is drowned out by the sound of the baying hounds of busy-ness, the harsh noise of conflict or just the clamor of the world around us. Habakkuk counsels patience. Even in the times when we do not sense a vision, a clear path, a way out of present difficulties, “there is still a vision for the appointed time.” We will discover how we are being called and what we are to do next with our lives.

What if we, like Habakkuk, would just station ourselves at a “watch post” – a quiet room in our home, outdoors in nature, somewhere at work, a formal place of worship, or even more metaphorically, a “place” inside ourselves, a “rampart”(a fortification) within our hearts – and demand that God clear a way for us, send us a glimpse of healing or wholeness for ourselves and our world? “Here I am, God! I will keep watch and see what you will say to me!” What if we were to yell at God about the devastation and the grief we see? What if, when we don’t know what is being asked of us, or we feel overwhelmed or incapable, or struggle to see where God is leading us, we spoke our doubts and uncertainties aloud? What if we refused to turn away, and waited with determination for God's reply?

Habakkuk's promise is that the vision will finally arrive. It will be so plain we can write it down so that a messenger can read it aloud. “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; It will surely come, it will not delay.” Finally, Habakkuk knew that God's response was not just for him, but for his whole community who were suffering. This is the promise that also comes from our reading this text together, in community. By our sharing of faith with one another, we stand on the ramparts together, and we never have to cry out to God or to wait for the vision alone. Amen.