

Habakkuk 1:1-4 (NRSV)

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

The Prophet's Complaint

- ² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
- ³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
- ⁴ So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Habakkuk 2:1-4 (NRSV)

God's Reply to the Prophet's Complaint

- 2** I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
- ² Then the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

When Violence Poses As Justice

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4*

The prophet Habakkuk has come to the end of his rope. Violence surrounds him. Destruction is everywhere he looks. And he is left frustrated and angry by a God who has failed to do anything for the victims. Habakkuk has been betrayed. He was God's prophet. He spoke God's word to the people. He was one of those who did the right thing. Dare we say he was righteous? But God didn't hold up the other end of the bargain.

And this is not the first time. It's not the first time that God has been a disappointment. Not the first time that God has made a fool out of his prophets. In words often preached in Advent, God says to Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people." And Isaiah sneers in return, "A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry? All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, ... surely the people are grass.'" And Isaiah is but one of a long list of other prophets like Habakkuk who cry out in anguish, who cry out at injustice, who cry out at unrighteousness and who finally beg for God's righteous anger to rain fire down on the evil ones. Like Job's friends, the prophets expect a universe in which the righteous are blessed and the evil are cursed. Unlike Job's friends, the prophets finally come to see clearly that their idea hasn't worked out, and they're as mad as hornets about it. God, where are you? God, wake up. God, you're asleep at the wheel.

Well, in most societies we've come to realize that waiting for God in situations like this is way too passive. Here in New England we grew up hearing that God helps those who help themselves. If you want justice, you can't just sit and wait for it. You've got to get out there and fight for it. In our church we certainly believe that. We have social justice outreach projects. We believe that we are partners with God in making the world better. We've been talking quite a bit in our staff meetings about the ways that North Prospect Union is involved in social justice, and other ways it might be. We're an open and affirming church. We are one of the founding churches of the Outdoor Church. We make a significant annual contribution to it. We collect socks and toiletries for it. And Jed Mannis, the Outdoor Church's minister, will be preaching here next week, to bring us a word from the Outdoor Church's work. On another front, we're hoping to get involved with the Heifer Project. The Heifer Project helps bring good breeding livestock to poor farmers all over the world. This breeding stock serves as the foundation for better and more productive farms. We'll have a presentation from the Heifer Project in December, and you might want to consider purchasing a Heifer Project gift in someone's name as a Christmas present this year. And yet another project we're planning is a presentation on the UCC coffee project, which helps support poor, small coffee farmers with fair prices while at the same time providing you some superior coffee. Some folks have been talking about volunteers for one of the local meal programs, others about Habitat for Humanity, and still others about becoming a green sanctuary. And there's much more.

Most of us are convinced, I think, that we have a part to play in working for justice, in

making the world a better place. We can't just sit back and wait for God to do it. It's part of what it means to live our faith, and it's part of what makes any church a vital and thriving community. I find it all quite exciting, fun even.

And, of course, we didn't just make up this idea that God calls us to be partners in this work. We all know that the Bible tells us to do justice, as the words of the prophet Micah remind us. And it's not just Micah. Like the base color of a tapestry – working for justice, helping the poor, the widow and the orphan; tending the sick; providing hospitality – like the base color of a tapestry these things form the tone against which every theme in the Old and New Testaments woven. It couldn't be any clearer. From the Exodus to the Sermon on the Mount it is the predominant mood of the Bible.

Nonetheless, we haven't yet provided a response that will satisfy Habakkuk. Habakkuk and his community are experiencing injustice directly and personally. They are facing violence directly and personally. They are facing suffering. They are facing persecution. And Habakkuk is not asking God why the Holy One hasn't sent some missionaries, or some livestock, or some food to help out. Habakkuk isn't asking why God hasn't sent any good neighbors. Habakkuk is asking why God hasn't come and killed the oppressors. Why God hasn't punished the enemy?

*** Those who find themselves in this situation often land on an obvious course of action. They extend the same logic that we have just now been using. Why would we wait for God to fight the oppressors? Why wouldn't we take care of it ourselves? If we don't sit around waiting for God to build houses for the poor, why would we sit around waiting for God to punish the unjust? If we have to help God fight injustice in social outreach, why wouldn't we help God to take out the evil ones? If we're going to figuratively fight for justice, why wouldn't we literally fight for it?

Interestingly, this is not the advice God gives to Habakkuk. When Habakkuk complains that God hasn't dealt with the wicked, which means that God hasn't squashed them, God responds somewhat enigmatically. It sounds like a riddle.

² Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³ 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.

⁴ Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Write the vision with letters big enough that a runner running by can read them. For God says, I still have a vision. Get it up there big. It's real. It's true. If it seems to be slow in coming, wait. Be patient. It will come without delay. The riddle? God says write the vision big. But what is Habakkuk supposed to write, since God's vision hasn't arrived yet, and Habakkuk can't see it? The further riddle? God says, If it's late in coming, wait. It won't be late. What in the world are we to make of this puzzle?

First and foremost God wants to get Habakkuk to slow down. Habakkuk is filled with

understandable urgency. The sky really is falling. And Habakkuk wants God to intervene as soon as possible. But God knows that if the sense of urgency remains at a fever pitch, then it will be a short step before Habakkuk takes things into his own hands. It will be a short step for Habakkuk to conclude that God wants him to become judge and executioner on God's behalf. God, first of all, bids Habakkuk to be patient.

And then God tells Habakkuk to look. God tells Habakkuk to look around him, to look at the proud. The Hebrew text refers to something a bit stronger than proud. A better translation would be the oppressor, or the unjust, or the wicked. God tells Habakkuk to look around him and see the unjust and the wicked. God points to the unjust and says, See, their spirit isn't right. There's something off about them. They're messed up. Then God points in the other direction and says, look at the just. They live by their faithfulness. God wants to hold these two pictures before Habakkuk. He wants Habakkuk to drink in the fact that the unjust aren't right in their souls. They're just not right. They're off. And God wants Habakkuk to see that the just are different, that their souls are whole, that they are not contorted and distorted by any injustice in them. Haven't we all seen the same thing?

God wants Habakkuk to slow down and drink this in because Habakkuk is at a fork in the road that makes all the difference. He must choose a course of action.

*** Now talking about this fork, I am often asked if it is not naive to believe that we can face violence with nonviolence. Isn't that a recipe to be walked all over? I have to tell you the truth. Deep in my heart I believe that even the most vicious who threaten us want the peace of the kingdom of heaven, if they could but see it.

There's the story of a big, tough samurai who once went to see a little monk. "Monk," he said, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience, "teach me about heaven and hell!"

The monk looked up at this mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain, Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you about anything. You're dirty. You smell. Your blade is rusty. You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Get out of my sight. I can't stand you."

The samurai was furious. He shook, got all red in the face, was speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword and raised it above him, preparing to slay the monk.

"That is hell," said the monk softly.

The samurai was overwhelmed. The compassion and surrender of this little man who had offered his life to give this teaching to show him hell! He slowly put down his sword, filled with gratitude, and suddenly he was peaceful.

'And that is heaven," said the monk softly.¹

Is it naive to believe that kindness and compassion, love and forgiveness can overcome and transform evil. I do not think it is naive. But I will grant that there may be times when for better or worse people or even societies and nations need to defend themselves. Sometimes they may need to injure others to do it. There are two caveats I would offer. The first is not to underestimate the power of love and compassion. A chant from the 60s went, Give peace a chance. Often, I think, we rush to a forcible defense long before we have really tried anything else. The second caveat is to check our hearts. It is possible though very rare, I imagine, to use

¹*Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart, 295-6*

self-protective violence with love and regret. But that is what it requires. If one must use force, or violence, it must be done with love and regret. For once the face becomes contorted with rage, once righteous anger cries out for justice or vengeance, once delight comes in causing another to suffer, we have taken a step backwards in the battle for our soul.

In Christianity on both the left and the right, in many other traditions, we find many like the prophet Habakkuk crying out for God to ratify our anger and violence in the name of justice. But God knows that jubilant and self-righteous violence may pose as justice, but real justice it can never deliver. God knows, and I believe we do, too, that only love delivers justice. God wants Habakkuk to realize that he cannot act unjustly and still claim to be acting in the cause of justice. If he meets violence with violence, hatred with hatred, evil with evil, in that very minute he will cross over the line and become the very thing he wishes to fight against. Should he cross that line, he would need but to look in a mirror, and he would see that he, too, had become off-center in his soul, and things would no longer right in him.

We can hear in this interchange echo of the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

*** It is inescapable, I think, that God calls us to work for justice. For God’s vision, the one God wants Habakkuk to write out in big letters and hold up high where everyone can see it, is a vision of the God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, just as we pray every week. And what God knows is that, as tempted as we may be by pain and persecution and righteous anger, by the desire to return evil for evil, violence for violence, force for force, to do so can only lead us further away from that vision. The healing that God desires for us can be worked only by love and forgiveness, never by vengeance or hatred.

Amen.