

Faith is How You Live  
Habakkuk 1:1-7; 2:1-4; 3:17-19a  
Matthew 26:36-38

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Habakkuk 1:1-7; 2:1-4; 3:17-19a

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 wrong-doing 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.

Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told. For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.

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. 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 faith. 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.

Matthew 26:36-38

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.”

Habakkuk is not a prophet we often hear from in this pulpit, or any pulpit. Even when I preached a series two years ago on so-called, “Minor-League Prophets,” I did not read from Habakkuk. Habakkuk has been seen as a dangerous book. Dangerous to certain governments, and therefore they tend to make it dangerous to those who are governed.

In 1940, a church newspaper in neutral Switzerland published an excerpt from Habakkuk without commentary. The military censors banned the newspaper as an attack on the Nazi regime next door. The *Reichskirk*, the Nazi state church, banned Habakkuk and printed Bibles without it.

Others have commented on this book, and their commentary stands to this day. Jean Calvin, in his commentary on the minor prophets, used such strong words about this passage that I choose not to quote them here, but you can see me or the copy of this sermon on the website if you're curious.<sup>1</sup>

In the Revised Common Lectionary, the most common arrangement of Biblical texts for preaching, the congregation hears only 8 verses of Habakkuk, once every three years. Just enough to say that it was included. And, each time, it is paired with the popular Gospel story of Zacchaeus, that wee little man. I remember hearing only one sermon in my life that focused on Habakkuk, and what I remember most is being astonished that this seminary student was preaching from Habakkuk.

The book of Habakkuk is from a traumatic time in the history of Judah. The prophet spoke not long after the Assyrian army invaded, killing many people and destroying nearly every town. That happened in the time of Isaiah and Micah and King Hezekiah. And not long after the prophet spoke, the Babylonians would come in and conquer Jerusalem, razing it to the ground and destroying the Temple. When Habakkuk speaks about the Chaldeans, that's the Babylonians. Same people. It's like saying, "the English" and, "the British."

The first few verses describe how the prophet looks around and he's overwhelmed by all the evil and violence that he sees. He asks why God tolerates all this evil, and why he himself has to see all the injustice, the oppression, the strife and terror around him. The prophet laments that the wicked are overpowering the righteous, and that justice is perverted.

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<sup>1</sup> "Tyrants and their cruelty cannot endure without great weariness and sorrow ... Hence almost the world sounds forth these words, How long, How long? When anyone disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits plunders, or oppresses miserable nations, when he distresses the innocent, all cry out, How long? And this cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictate of justice, is at length heard by the Lord ... This confusion of order and justice is not to be endured." -- John Calvin, Calvin's Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets, Habakkuk 2: 6, volume 4, 93-94.

In the context of this violence, we hear Habakkuk's lament, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"

In the middle of this nightmare, the prophet helps his people voice their pain, to cry over the very real anguish that they are experiencing.

This lament joins laments from all over the world in which people have found the words to name the situations of violence and injustice in their lives. As I mentioned, this book was banned in Nazi Germany. It was read in the antebellum South, and in *apartheid*-era South Africa, and in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe.

We need to be aware that the violence and terror didn't go away as soon as Habakkuk spoke up. Violence continues through most of the rest of the book. The people of Judah do end up going into exile in Babylon for a generation. These things are real. And anyone who tells you that being a Christian or having faith is some kind of an "Easy Button" either does not understand how the world works, or believes that you don't.

Sin and pain and violence and death are real. They are all around us, and pretending that they are not real or do not affect us does no one any good. You can live for a while in the pretty little town of Denial, Ohio, but sooner or later the rug will get yanked out from under you.<sup>2</sup>

We don't get to say, "I'm a Christian, so I'm not tempted to sin." We don't get to say, "I'm a Christian, so of course I'm physically and mentally healthy." We don't get to say, "I'm a Christian, so my relationships are always what they ought to be." I wish, but no. That's not how the world works.

We like quick fixes, don't we? And easy answers, where we don't have to work too hard? I know I do. But that's not how the world works.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the Ohio Opioid Education Alliance for the image of Denial, Ohio.

I'll say it again: Sin and pain and violence and death are real. They are all around us, and they can be overwhelming.

However, one of the key messages of the whole Bible is that they do not get the last word. God created the universe, and God gets to make the rules.

God tells Habakkuk to write this vision down in letters so big that someone running by can read it.

The days of tyrants are numbered. The days of sin and pain and violence and death are numbered.

The day is surely coming, says the Lord, when the nations will come to Jerusalem to be judged. The day is coming when all the nations shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.<sup>3</sup> The day is coming when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.<sup>4</sup> “The day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”<sup>5</sup>

That day is not here yet. You may have noticed.

We have been waiting for that day all our lives. Our parents waited for that day, and their parents, all the way back to the people of Judah in the sixth century BC. No one knows when that day will happen: it will come like a thief in the night.<sup>6</sup> It will most likely not happen in the lifetime of any of us in this room.

But there is good news!

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

<sup>4</sup> Amos 5:24.

<sup>5</sup> Malachi 4:1.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:2.

The good news is that God has started working in the world toward that wonderful day.

Advent is all about preparing our hearts and preparing our lives to celebrate the arrival in the world not of a mighty army, but of a baby.

So what do we do in the meantime?

Jesus told us. He told us to stay awake. Pay attention to what's happening in the world. Even when it would be more pleasant to wear blinders.

Habakkuk tells us. He tells us to keep believing in the God who will bring deliverance. This unflinching belief in God's ability to make an end to violence and injustice is why the book Habakkuk was banned in Nazi Germany -- the idea that God will end unjust power was a threat to the Nazi regime.

So yes, "Don't Stop Believin'."<sup>7</sup>

But the notion of believing something and not doing anything about it is very modern. The concept of belief as something separate from action did not exist until the "Age of Enlightenment" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That means that any time anyone in the Bible talks about believing something, that belief is supposed to go with action. If we say we believe something, but we don't really do anything about it, Jesus and anyone else in the Bible would ask the question, "Do you really believe it?"

So, in the meantime between the prophecy of God's justice and its coming, we lament. We point out where the world is not what it should be, and we keep the Truth of God and of good and of love from being lost amidst all the ... mess that surrounds us.

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<sup>7</sup> Journey reference fully intentional.

We pray. We pray the words we sang at the beginning of this service. “Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set your people free.” And we mean it.

And we do what God has told us is good. We do justice, we love mercy, and we walk humbly with our God. We never stop being the God-loving, neighbor-loving people whom God has called us to be. We feed the hungry. We find coats for cold kids. We make up blessing bags and we give them to people who need them. We seek out new ways to love and serve the people around us.

Even in the midst of violence and depravity. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We do these things knowing that Jesus walks with us. We do these things knowing that God’s love is real. We do these things knowing that God’s justice is real. We do these things knowing that God’s justice is coming.

Knowing that gives us the strength not only to go on, but to rejoice in the LORD; to exult in the God of our salvation. For “God, the Lord, is [our] strength; he makes [our] feet like the feet of a deer, and makes [us] tread upon the heights.”

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.