

Habakkuk the Prophet

The Book of Habakkuk

If you turn on the news or listen to talk radio, as you scroll through your social media feeds, they can be full of cries for justice. Stories of shootings and stabbings, wars and violence, storms and floods all point us to what is going wrong in the world. As we look at that, we wonder where God is, and wonder when God is going to fix everything.

The opening lines of Habakkuk seem as contemporary as the evening news. It's an unusual opening, beginning with a complaint that sparks a conversation between the prophet and his God.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save? (Habakkuk 1:2)
"Why do you make me see wrongdoing and
look at trouble?" Habakkuk asks God.
"Destruction and violence are before me; strife
and contention arise" (1:3). In common with
most of us, Habakkuk stands aghast at the
"destruction and violence" all around (1:3) and
wonders how it is that justice seems never to
conquer.

God gives an answer to the prophet. He tells Habakkuk that he has heard his complaint and the people's cry for justice, and he plans to do something about it. He will raise up the brutal Babylonians, also known as "the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation" (1:6), to punish Judah's injustice and put her violence to an end. The Lord will fight fire with fire. He will destroy a violent nation with an even more violent and wicked nation that devours nations and levels cities like sand castles. "At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it" (1:10). In other words, "Don't worry,

Habakkuk! I got it covered. I'm going to wipe your country off the face of the map, and that will take care of those evildoers you're complaining about!"

But that is too much for Habakkuk to take! The prophet cannot believe that God's eyes, "too pure to behold evil," could look on silently "when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they" (v 13) — indeed, that God could rouse Judah's neighbors to violence against his chosen people (v 6). It's overkill! He brings another complaint against the Lord (1:12-17) and wonders how a holy and righteous God can "remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he" (1:13). How can a holy God use the godless, violent Babylonians to punish the chosen people of God? Habakkuk cannot make it make sense! It doesn't add up. It doesn't seem right or fair. What kind of God are we dealing with?

But despite the divine silence, Habakkuk remains confident that God will answer: Habakkuk resolves to "stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart," to "keep watch to see what he will say to me" (2:1).

In our time, too, that's sometimes as much as we can do: "keep watch." Not impatiently, but expectantly. For what God promised to Habakkuk, he promises to us, that he will make plain his "vision for the appointed time. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay" (2:3). And the Lord does answer, because God always answers prayer. It may not be the answer we want to hear, and sometimes it's difficult to discern the difference between the answers of "no." and "wait." We may need to wait a long time for the answer—

he will not answer before we are ready to hear and receive it.

But then we come to God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint: "And the Lord answered me: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not right within him...'" (Habakkuk. 2:2-4a).

In other words, "Be patient, Habakkuk! Wait a while longer." You see: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The reason the Lord doesn't just snap his fingers and spontaneously combust the wicked is because God is patient towards you! He wants "all people to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). God wants to save his people, not destroy them, He wants to save everyone!

And then comes the most famous declaration of all in the Book of Habakkuk: "But the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4b). The righteous shall live by faith. Now that's good news! This powerful statement is quoted three times in the New Testament; in Romans, in Galatians, and in Hebrews.

"The righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4b). But there is none righteous, no, not even one. Certainly not any of us. Actually, there is One. His name is Jesus. Jesus is the Righteous One, the only righteous man who ever lived. Fully God and fully human, Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins so we could be forgiven. If you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as your Savior and Lord, then the Lord will declare you righteous

and forgive your sins so that you too can live by faith—not just today, but forever in eternity! So how do we do that? The answer to that question is found in Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous shall live by his faith." God invites us to put our faith in Him - not just when life is smooth and everything is working out just the way we want it, but also when things are falling apart at the seams and words "unsettled times" only begin to describe what is going on. Maybe right now is one of those times for you.

This is the Good News: The righteous shall live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). We live because Jesus died and lives again. That is our faith. That is the only reason we can live and stand before God. Because of God's grace in Jesus, we can boldly and confidently stand before the Lord our God. We can stand at the watchpost and station ourselves on the tower and to wait and see what God will say, and how he will give answer to our complaint.

And the Lord does answer! The Lord promises Habakkuk that Babylon will not escape God's punishment. Even though God can wield a wicked nation as a blunt instrument of his wrath to discipline his people, the wicked never go unpunished. They will be judged. And so will Babylon (2:6-19). "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him" (2:20).

The Book of Habakkuk ends with a confession of faith and a prayer. "God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." (Habakkuk 3:19) Have you ever seen a deer bounding about in hilly, uneven terrain? They can do it because they have been equipped for it. If other animals less equipped, or you and I, tried to bound about with the same agility in those conditions it wouldn't be pretty. Likewise, if we try to navigate our way through the most

challenging times in our lives with just our own resources, we will be ill-equipped to do it. But, if we take on those same challenges with faith in the Lord, our feet will be secure and we will nimbly maneuver our way through like a deer on a mountain.

There are times in our lives that if we focused exclusively on our circumstances, we would surely be brought to a place of despair. But as Habakkuk sets his eyes on the Lord, he is able to say that he is going to rejoice in the Lord and find joy in the God who has saved him. Because God is giving him strength he will stand strong and secure in spite of his unsettling surroundings.

And so we can pray with Habakkuk, complaining to God and waiting for His answer. And he will. And he does—through his holy Word and his body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. He gives us faith and strengthens our faith and helps us to believe even in the face of death and destruction. He promises that justice will come. We have hope that Christ will return to set things right, to judge the earth, to raise our bodies from the dead, and to renew the whole creation. Until that Day we need only to hope and wait and pray for his forgiveness.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
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