

PLEASE WAIT

Advent 1. Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-4; 3:17-19.



I realize that the book of the prophet Habakkuk may not be high on your Bible-must-read list. So let me put in a little plug for him:

- It won't take you very long to read the book.

Not even 2½ pages in my Bible.

- In those 2½ pages you'll encounter a sensitive and distraught person who is willing to challenge God, speaking to God on behalf of the people, which is very unusual; typically a prophet speaks to the people on behalf of God.

- And, you will be in good company. To give you an example: in 1940, a church newspaper in Switzerland published an article with a lengthy quotation from Habakkuk. The military censors banned the paper as a provocative critique of the Nazi regime. The idea that God will end unjust power was considered too dangerous to be tolerated. Speaking truth to power can be risky.

- In the 1980s, Allan Boesak, South African preacher, scholar and activist preached a series of rousing sermons on Habakkuk as a way of opposing apartheid and seeking its end. Those sermons galvanized the population that was oppressed under the apartheid regime. Not a bad pedigree...

Habakkuk looks around and sees things in his day that we might recognize in ours. He sees injustices, local and national, organic and structural. He sees violence and abuse. He finds communities and even families divided and infighting. And worst of all, he finds that God's teaching, God's Torah, is used to condone all of that. People have lost their moral compass and their sense of purpose. And in all of that he wonders out loud, where is God?

When things get bad, when affairs in our world or our communities look bleak, when about everywhere you look lives and relationships are being broken and destroyed, when you feel like crying out, "where is God?!", there's a few responses you can think of. And you know them all; maybe you've used them yourself.

We can say, "Well, it's not as bad as it seems." And sometimes that's absolutely true. Sometimes life happens in ways that you think you just can't handle, and all you want do it to curl up in the fetal position and hide in a corner. But often, once you have gone through the initial shock and discussed it with loved ones and slept on it, a much clearer perspective and a plan emerges, and you begin to see how you might be able to handle it.

But sometimes it *is* as bad as it seems. We all hope it won't happen to us, but chances are that at some point awful things will happen in our lives. Sometimes a relationship cannot be healed. Sometimes your business will go under. Sometimes that disease will do great harm to a loved one or to you. Life happens; and a mature faith needs to be able to look life square in the eye and not flinch from the truth, hard as it may be. But that's hard, isn't it?

Unfortunately, all too often we like to use “spiritual shortcuts” to get around pain or avoid having to deal with the tough questions. Instead of travelling “the valley of darkness” we cover it up with some theology-light to make it look better than it actually is. We things like: “God never gives you more than you can handle.” Tell that to the mother of the little girl who got killed in the Santa parade in Dartmouth a week ago.

Or we say: “God is trying to teach you something.” Telling someone that denies the very real suffering and heartache they go through; after all, it's for your own good. Meanwhile, we secretly hope that God never wants to teach me that lesson. I think of the people I've been privileged to walk with, and yeah – it was every bit as bad as it seemed, and sometimes even worse.

Another response is that it really is as bad as it seems; it won't get any better, in fact it may well get worse. So you might as well give up, accept that it's a jungle out there in which only the fittest will survive. It's called cynicism, a mindset we have seen growing fast over the past few years.

Now, we can pretty that up a bit and smooth out the edges, and we often do. For instance: as we move into December we are flooded with appeals to give for the sake of the economically marginalized, the poor, the homeless. Now don't misunderstand me – those *are* very worthy causes and they do deserve our fullest support.

A few weeks ago, Kirby and Cecil took Jacomyn and me out to see the Manna for Health Food Bank. And at some point Kirby said, “You know, this is only a Band-Aid. We shouldn't have to be doing this.” What he was saying is, these programs are made necessary because something is fundamentally wrong in our society – and we allow it to happen.

We need those programs because our society, like Habakkuk's, does not live by God's teachings. Sure, people are sort of generous for one month of the year, so they're off the hook for the other 11 months of the year. When we do that, we accept that things *are* as bad as they seem; we have given up.

Then there's one more possible answer, saying yes, it *is* as bad as it seems – but God is not finished yet. The bad news is real, but the bad news is not the whole story. Those glimpses we catch of kindness, courage, generosity, of selflessness and visionary leadership and faith are not just insignificant little blips on the radar. They are very real and we should not underestimate them.

I'm sure you've seen grass and flowers and even trees poking through thick layers of concrete and asphalt. It tells us that no matter what *we* do to it, life cannot be stopped. We can slap all manner of death on it – even stick it in a tomb for three days – but life will triumph, because God wills it. We can slap all manner of cynicism on life, but hope dares to persist. That's why we lit a candle of Hope this morning, a tiny flickering light with the power to chase away the shadows of hunger, pain and injustice.

That's where Habakkuk comes in. As far as he can tell God is not on the scene; asleep at the switch. But he will *not* take a spiritual shortcut, or give in to cynicism or complacency. But he isn't going to let God off the hook, either! Relentlessly he's demanding to know “Why, God?!” and “How long much longer?!” and will not quit until he gets an answer.

Finally, he gets his answer – kind of. The vision doesn't answer that. It says “wait;” “be patient,” “hang in there”, “keep the faith, the time is coming.” Honestly?! How's *that* going to help the folks who are suffering now? What kind of answer is that for the folks who work tirelessly in obscurity for important transformative change?!

How's that going to restore our dying eco-system?

“Just be patient” sounds an awful lot like another spiritual shortcut, “There, there. Be patient. Just have faith.” That's just not good enough!

But if we read further and push deeper into Habakkuk's vision we discover that, even while we wait and demand answers, God's way – God's realm – is already finding root among us, growing in unexpected places.

God is not blind to the actions of the tyrants and the exploiters and manipulator and fear mongers, of course not. But wealth, fame and power are passing things, they come and go. Those powerful people at the top like us to think they control everything – but we know they don't. God does, and God doesn't work with our top-down structure. God works from the bottom up, working side by side with the little people who build welcoming, inclusive communities, who work for justice, wholeness and right relations.

So remember not to focus on the big and the flashy, but to look to the small and incremental, and you will catch glimpses of God's very real presence among us. And you will realize that God isn't done yet, not by a long shot!

So the waiting we are asked to do? That's not the same waiting we do when standing at a bus stop or sitting in a doctor's waiting room; that's passive waiting, waiting for something to finally happen.

The kind of biblical waiting we are asked to do is very active. It's the kind of waiting you did as a kid, when you were counting the sleeps before your birthday, or Christmas Eve or summer vacation. The signs were everywhere, you knew it was coming and that nothing would stop it; you just wished you could speed up time. I remember looking forward to my birthday so much as a kid that the waiting for it was almost painful!

That's the kind of waiting Habakkuk did, the biblical waiting he was told to do.

It's also the waiting *we* are called to do. The season of Advent is our annual boot camp, training us in the fine art of active, watchful waiting. All around us the world seems to throw itself into a frenzy of Christmas activities – while the church waits, waits in the darkness, knowing that the Light will shine but we are not able to rush its arrival. Yet we want it to come so badly, it sometimes hurts.

Maybe like Habakkuk we feel like shouting at God to “Hurry up already!” And maybe like Habakkuk, we then realize that it's already happening. You just have to know where to look... Can you see it...? Can you feel it...?

Amen.