

# “It Will Surely Come”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 2, 2018*

First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:10-16

Rev. John Wahl

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

Advent is season when we focus on waiting. We recall how the people of Israel waited many generations for the Messiah that God had promised them. We, ourselves, are waiting for Christmas; and we are waiting along with the communion of saints for the coming of Christ in glory, which will usher in God’s kingdom in glory. To be honest, though, right now we are really just waiting for Christmas.

But the ways that we wait are definitely not the same. Some of us look at our long to-do lists and become paralyzed into inaction. Others of us do not make a list at all, but instead seem to flail around with aimless energy. And still others react with lament; saying that things used to be so much simpler; that people were kinder and gentler; that Christmas hasn’t been the same since NORAD started tracking Santa’s travels.

But, this morning, we encounter waiting as God’s response to suffering; to the pain and violence that the prophet Habakkuk sees when he looks around at the troubled people of Israel and the nations that surround them. “How long,” he wonders, can the situation remain so dire; “how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” (1:1)

Habakkuk is what we refer to as one of the minor prophets; not because of the impact of his message, but because of the length of his writing. His is a peculiar name, suggesting some non-Hebrew origin. Some say that it is derived from a type of plant; others believe that it is variation of Jacob – the patriarch of the Jewish faith who, after wrestling against God through the night, was given a new name: Israel. For this reason, the name Habakkuk is sometimes translated as “ardent embrace” – holding on and refusing to let go.<sup>1</sup>

Our children’s bulletin for today describes the prophet Habakkuk as being *very sad*. As much as he might have wanted to deliver some good news to his people, he sees only violence. Like can happen to many of us today, he has grown overwhelmed by all of the wickedness and perversions of justice around him. And so, in the midst of

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<sup>1</sup> John Dobbs, “Hope in the Dark”

what seems like a nightmare, all that he can do is to help his people voice their pain; to cry over the anguish they are experiencing.

Habakkuk knew about God's plan for the future: God's desire that all people will one day live together in peace and justice. But from his perspective, God wasn't acting; nothing was changing; and things seemed to be getting even worse. Had God forgotten the promise; had they been forsaken? The Law was being misappropriated by the wicked. Justice was not only being prevented, it was being perverted. In God's absence, the Law was twisted and applied brutally, gracelessly, and unfairly. Think, today, about immigrant children caged, separated from and left behind by parents who have been deported. Think of a reporter gruesomely murdered by a government that he has been critical of. This is the problem and present reality not only for and in the days of Habakkuk, but for almost any time and place.

And so, the prophet decides to stand watch, to listen for God's voice; he takes upon himself the role of staying faithful for the sake of his people. After waiting for who knows how long, God's answer comes. However, it is not what anyone likes to hear; God says, "wait for it." (2:3) Be patient. Deliverance is coming, but you will have to wait. This response challenges all the easy answers and quick fixes that we so crave. As history would bear out, the prophet's message would be followed by many more years of violence and injustice. Things would get worse before they got better. However, even in the most trying circumstances, Habakkuk clings to God's faithfulness and love.

There still is, Habakkuk is told, "a vision for the appointed time." (2:3) In the Hebrew, this phrase is used to designate important events in the life of the people of Israel: festival times, births, seasonal migrations, and yes, even the end of time. The *appointed time* means the right time, God's time.<sup>2</sup>

This is the essence of Advent waiting. It is not a race to finish our to-do lists; it is not an excuse to become a whirling dervish of activity; and it is also not a time to shut ourselves down and count the days until the holidays have passed and things can get back to "normal." For when it appears that the wicked have triumphed and justice has failed, we proclaim and live into the promise that God's righteousness will, in God's appointed time, prevail. Even in the face of violence and destruction, we proclaim the victory of life over death. Even when justice seems to be thwarted and judgment is perverted, we dare to celebrate the birth of a child who has come to bring peace to the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Jacobson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The final section of Habakkuk, verse 17 of chapter 3, begins with a crucial word: *though*. The prophet is not saying that all has been resolved. He is saying that the righteous live by faith *even though*...As with all the followers of God through the generations who have experienced pain and loss, who have witnessed violence and perversions of justice, the faith to follow and trust in God happens *even though*. Habakkuk does not back away from the losses that are their present reality: loss of food and commerce and stability; *even though* this is what is currently being witnessed, “yet,” the prophet says, “I will rejoice in the Lord.” (3:18)

Advent is the season of waiting. In the concluding verse of the prophet’s writing, he makes the claim that, “God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of the deer, and makes me to tread upon the heights.” (3:19) At the end of all our questions about how long we have to wait for God to act, we must decide whom we will trust. Will it be ourselves, or will it be our leaders, or will it be the God who gives us sure footing in rocky places and times? At some point, we realize that we are not waiting on a God who will answer all of our questions, who will remove us from all the struggles and difficulties. No, we wait on the God who will walk with us through the darkest valleys and keep our feet steady as we go. Even in the darkness, God gives us hope; and that is where we need it most.

Even Habakkuk’s confession of faith acknowledges that the time of violence and suffering is not over. The fig tree may not blossom. There might be no fruit on the vines. It could be that there are no livestock in the stalls. And yet, the beautiful thing about this confession is that a believer can still say: I place my trust in the God that gives me strength. This conviction is what causes us not only to go on, but to tread on the heights like a deer.<sup>3</sup>

God responded to Habakkuk, saying, I have not forgotten you; the time will surely come. For now, we can only do what is sometimes most difficult for us to do. Work, yes; struggle to bring about justice and relief to those in need, and offer hope to others, certainly. And yet, we also must wait. Waiting is difficult, but it is an essential part of faith. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Rawn, “What Are You Waiting For?”