

“How Long, O Lord?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

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

Today marks the first Sunday in the season of Advent – the time of anticipation and preparation for the incarnation of Christmas. Culturally, though, we know the preparations have already begun. As soon as Halloween passed, store shelves were filled with trees and trimmings, local radio stations began playing Christmas music around the clock, and holiday movies started to show up on seemingly every channel. Throughout November, lights began going up on houses and all the best Black Friday deals were put on display.

But, while Advent is an appropriate time for preparation, it is also a season of longing for something different; of claiming hope in a God that will transform the world we know – with all its ugliness and violence – into something more.

The book of Habakkuk gives us an appropriate – if unexpected – text to contemplate on this first Sunday of Advent. It begins with an honest lament about the prophet’s current situation. When he looks around, all that he sees is violence and destruction. Wickedness surrounds the righteous and justice does not prevail. The law – the Torah – has become slack and ineffective; literally it has been perverted and gone numb.¹

Within this context of violence, we hear Habakkuk’s lament: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” The question testifies to prolonged suffering; the speaker cannot imagine an end to the misery. The prophet is begging for God to listen, to do something about the devastation he constantly sees.

At the beginning of this Advent season, this is where many of us stand, as well. We see mass shootings take place in Virginia, in Colorado, then in Virginia again. We watch as bombs continue to rain down in Ukraine, taking out more power stations just when the snow is starting to fall. We hear of alarming examples

¹ John Holbert, “The Faithful and Their Righteousness” from *Patheos.com*

of antisemitism and other forms of discrimination in our communities and beyond – *O Lord, how long?*

When we turn forward to the second chapter, we find Habakkuk standing at his watch post, waiting for God to respond to his cry of lament. And then, perhaps shockingly, we hear God's answer: "Write the vision; make it plain..."

Writing gives the vision transferability: a "runner" – such as a courier – can carry the message far and wide. Writing also gives the vision permanence: something that speaks to the theme of waiting that runs through these prophecies. "For there is still a vision for the appointed time," God says, even "if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come."²

It might also be that God is calling for a vision that is legible and clear enough to be seen when one is running by it. Many of us find ourselves running these days – from one appointment or responsibility to the next; juggling the many things we intend to and must take care of. If this vision is to be seen and remembered, it needs to be short and simple – such that the message can stand out, unobscured by flowery language; digestible even by those always in a rush.

Just what is this vision that Habakkuk is commanded by the Lord to write? Given what we heard in his previous complaint, the vision may be the certainty that no matter how badly the law has been perverted, no matter how long the people have been suffered from violence, God will not forget them. The promise of justice and peace may seem to tarry, to take a long time in coming, but it will surely come; God – in the appointed time, in the right time, in God's time – will act; and the righteous will live by their faith.

And this is the life of faith, is it not? To live in the space between lament in the midst of destruction and violence on the one hand, and the promise of God's appointed time on the other. This is where – as people of faith – we live; active and alive in this world, struggling against the perversion of justice and the slacking of God's law; while waiting for God's promised time. God calls on us to proclaim the vision – to write it on a tablet, to make it clear and simple – that God has answered our cries and will again; that God has come to us in Christ Jesus and so we have been and will be saved through his promises.³

In the concluding verses of Habakkuk, it is again the prophet who is speaking, this time in a psalm or prayer. His present circumstances have not

² Cameron Howard from WorkingPreacher.com

³ Karl Jacobsen from WorkingPreacher.com

changed: he is still surrounded by signs of barrenness. The trees do not blossom, the vines hold no fruit. It seems as if even the natural world has turned against them. Everywhere the prophet looks, there are signs of emptiness, hunger, poverty, and exhaustion. He sees only misery all around.

“Yet,” the prophet says; and this is a big yet, “I will rejoice in the Lord.” Though there is emptiness all around him, Habakkuk is full: he has heard and proclaimed God’s promise that though the appointed time has not yet arrived, it is coming. The present suffering that he and his people and his land are experiencing will come to an end. In place of barrenness, there will one day be abundance; instead of violence, they will experience peace.

Habakkuk reminds believers throughout the centuries how important it is to keep on believing in a God that brings deliverance. God hears the cries of those who are suffering under the yoke of unjust regimes, defilement of justice, and the constant threat of violence. There is good news ahead for those being oppressed; not so good news for those who abuse their power.

What has changed between calling out to God in the first chapter and rejoicing in God at the end? God has spoken; God has engaged. And rather than remaining at his watch post – sitting and waiting – the prophet has acted. At God’s prompting, he has written the vision, making it as clear and simple as he can for those frantically and fearfully racing around. Habakkuk has made his message both permanent: a part of the historical record, and transferable: able to be carried far and wide, translated and shared even with those who are harried or tired of lament.

Behind all the tinsel and lights, underneath the parties and wrapped gifts, many in our world are hurting and wondering *O Lord, how long?* How long with all this illness and disease? How long with the senseless violence and war? How long with the corruption and deceit? How long with the barrenness, hunger, and exhaustion? How long must we wait until a change will come, until a new dawn will break?⁴

The vision that Habakkuk was told to cast, the promise that we are called to proclaim, does not provide an answer to that exact question. God’s time – the appointed time – does not fit within our calendars. While we know that within a matter of weeks, Christmas will arrive, our foundational belief in God’s response to our lament is a matter of faith.

⁴ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

We are, of course, given signs. We will witness angels and shepherds; wise men and stars that each play a part in the birth story of Jesus. These will remind us that God is at work, even now, in ordinary and unexpected ways. Even when the violence and devastation seem endless, God's promised reign of peace is drawing nearer. The same God who delivered in the past will act with justice and compassion again. This is the promise we are called to remember and proclaim.

Habakkuk chooses to express his faith by rejoicing in the Lord. He has been assured that God has heard his cries, and, from that assurance, he draws strength. His hope rests not in what he has yet seen, but in what God promises is still to come; longing for the day when God's law is no longer perverted, when he and his people and his land will again be free from the violence all around them, from the emptiness that prevents its flourishing.

In Advent, amid all of today's destruction and despair, we join with the prophets in their relentless hope, looking for God's strength in a weary world, and proclaiming the vision that the promise will arrive, right on time. We rejoice in the Lord because our strength is found in God. For coming to save us, and for the promise that salvation will come again, we offer to God our longing, expectant praise. Amen.