

“Begin, Again.: Make it Plain”

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

October 25, 2020

As we begin the sermon, please open your Bibles to Habakkuk. There yet? I know, most of you don't have a Bible nearby. But I wonder if you *could* find this little book? It's right after Nahum and right before Zephaniah...does that help? Chances are high that you've never heard a sermon on this ancient text, appropriately included among the so-called “minor” prophets. The fact is that we know almost nothing about him. His Wikipedia page is meager: “For almost every other prophet, more information is given, such as the name of the prophet's hometown, his occupation, or information concerning his parentage or tribe. For Habakkuk, however, there is no reliable account of any of these. Beyond the Bible, considerable conjecture has been put forward over the centuries in the form of Christian and Rabbinic tradition, but such accounts are dismissed by modern scholars as speculative and apocryphal.”¹ Not much help there. Even the name is unusual, with no clear parallel in any ancient Semitic language.

There is, I think, another reason Habakkuk is rarely referenced in contemporary sermons. It has to do with the prophet's candid and even confrontational questioning of God's justice and power. This heated argument begins in the opening verses and takes up most of the book. Habakkuk writes in a time of violence and injustice, of wanton destruction and corrupted power. Writing in the same era, the prophet Jeremiah leaves no room for interpretation: “Scoundrels are found among my people; they take the goods of others...they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan...and they do not defend the rights of the needy... They have acted shamefully... yet they are not ashamed. They do not know how to blush!” These words do travel, don't they?

Well, Habakkuk has seen enough of this and he

wants an answer: how long must evil and injustice be the norm? How long will cries for help be met only with God's silence and absence?

The cries of complaint in chapter one are answered in chapter two, but perhaps not the way Habakkuk had expected or hoped. The questions are universal to human experience. We have all asked them in moments of doubt and despair—why do bad things happen to good people? Why must the innocent suffer while evil is rewarded? They are good and thoughtful questions, questions that I hear often from those whose lives have taken unexpected and unwanted turns, questions that suffering people around the world have asked for many generations, questions seemingly all of us are asking now. How long shall we cry for help and you will not listen? You have to respect the prophet for voicing what we all quietly ponder.

God's answer takes the shape of command and promise. There is still a vision. Share it with others. Of course, all of Habakkuk's evidence is to the contrary. The chosen people of God are held captive by a foreign empire, they are surrounded on every side by signs of Babylon's power and God's apparent impotence; even the temple, the place where they came to worship, has been utterly destroyed. God's people are worshipping remotely. There is very little perceptible reason to be hopeful about the future that God promises. Even as God speaks of a vision, Habakkuk cannot see it.

You may find yourself in a similar place this morning; you may be asking the same questions; you may look at the suffering of the world, the pain in your own circle of family and friends, and wonder if God has checked out. All of us have experienced

the apparent absence of God that, in the words of a friend, “defies the catechism.” If you are in the midst of one of those valleys in your journey of faith, God’s word to Habakkuk is a word for you this morning. That word is...*wait*. Maybe not the most comforting suggestion on its surface, but I’d suggest it is the most hopeful word you will hear today. Wait. Watch. Pray. Look for signs of God’s presence on the horizon, and trust that a new day is dawning. There will be a new beginning. As Winston Churchill famously said, “when you are going through hell, keep going.”

God knew that the people needed a message of hope, and so Habakkuk was entrusted with a promise that God had not given up or gone away. The message that God gives to the prophet is clear—there is still a vision, God is in control, we must wait.

You may be thinking: if our only hope is in God, and if we are instructed to simply wait for God’s next move, are we simply puppets in a divinely scripted play? The answer is no, and God’s response to Habakkuk makes that clear as well. The prophet, and the prophetic community, is called to publish the vision of God’s future, to live by faith in that vision.

One of my favorite books on the purpose and practice of financial stewardship is this thin paperback from 1977, “My Gospel of Stewardship,” written by Thomas L. Are. The book has special resonance for me because Tom wrote it when he was pastor of Shallowford Presbyterian Church, the congregation in Atlanta that I served for seven years. One of Tom’s central messages, delivered with theological depth and personal testimony, is that faithful stewardship requires radical and life-changing trust.

He tells the story of a church member who sat in his office one day and confessed some serious lapses of professional judgment. What he had done was not against the law, but it was unethical and, as a result, his legal practice and marriage were in trouble. The man asked Tom to pray for him, then broke down and began to cry. “What am I going to do?” Tom replied, “If I were you, I believe I would begin giving to the

church, I would tithe.” Tom continues, “At first he thought I was joking.” But no pastoral advice could have been more serious or heartfelt. Tom writes, “He had reached a point in life where he had to covenant with God or just continue to live in the same rut he was in.” The man needed to make a radical decision to trust God, not partially but fully, not just with empty promises but with concrete actions. Only then would he experience genuine transformation.

The call of God’s people is a call to radical trust—waiting on the edge of our seats and the tips of our toes for God’s vision to appear. The role of the prophet is to make that vision plain. Make it plain. It is a powerful phrase still preserved in many Christian traditions. I remember preaching to the inmates at Metro State Women’s Prison. Knowing that I was nervous, one of the inmates reassured me by saying, “Chap, if we aren’t getting what we need, we’ll let you know.” And they did, using that phrase, repeated as often as necessary “Make it plain, chap, just make it plain.” This is what the church must do. In a world of far too much injustice, violence, and tragedy, we must broadcast a vision of God’s kingdom so powerfully and boldly that everyone will see it, even those running by at a frenetic pace.

The church is called to be a visionary community refusing captivity to current circumstances. We must be those who cast a vision for the future that is held firmly in God’s providential hands. If we don’t, who will?

By the end of this short book, Habakkuk has found his prophetic voice; though external circumstances have not changed, the prophet has accepted his call to speak a word that must be spoken, to make plain the vision of God’s future. His final words give poetic voice to the reality he sees and the future he envisions...listen: “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.”

This strange little book buried in the minor prophets has a major message for our moment. Our hope is in God's promise. When that doesn't seem like enough, when we are not strong enough, when the burden is too heavy to carry alone, we lean on one another. We share hope and bread and peace and cards and casseroles and love and courage. We commit our resources and our time and our God-given gifts to what matters. We stake our lives on the promise that God is still with us, has never left us, will always walk beside us and go before us.

Even when we cannot see it, we trust that there is still a vision for us, for our time.

Hear the word of the Lord...don't give up. Amen.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habakkuk>