

10/17/21 Windsor Savoy and First Champaign “The Righteous Live by Their Faith.”
Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4, plus Luke 18:1-8

Habakkuk 1:1-4 (NRSV)

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

(Habakkuk cried,)

² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

(And as Habbakuk watched God replied.)

2 I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he^[a] will answer concerning my complaint.

² Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³ For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

⁴ Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.^[b]

When I was in college, probably 1982 or 1983, an evangelical multi-media presentation on Habakkuk came to my campus. The premise was that the war Habakkuk and the Israelites were caught in was a spiritual war that goes on at a cosmic level.

The images that went across the screen were modern day images of an ancient war. Giant tanks and bombs and military machinery interspersed with the ancient words from the prophet Habakkuk. Bright graphics, digitalized, painted photos, and sounds bombarded our eyes and our ears. It was mind-boggling. We saw a representation of the tremendous ancient military that the Assyrians built from 745 BC to around 612 BC. Warriors moving from region to region, destroying and devastating everything; burnings and displaced families. For a hundred plus years the Israelites lived in fear of the Assyrians like this.

Then the images on the screen shifted and we saw the Chaldeans of 612 BC destroy the Assyrians and the destructive cycle started all over. The small nomadic people of Israel could hardly compete with such destruction. The small nomadic Israelites were caught in the middle. What could they expect? More grief? Habakkuk prayed, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?”

And then,hopeGod replies to Habakkuk with a vision of a time that will come when justice will be served. “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” Destruction, yes, but there is that hope: “the righteous live by their faith.”

There are times in our lives when we do and will feel defenseless like the Israelites must have. There are parts of the world for which suffering is more than a feeling but a physical reality, sometimes closer to home than we realize. The pandemic brought it very close to some of us. How are the righteous to live by faith? Habakkuk knew to pray.

Through the stories of the disciples, our gospels prepare us for times that will be times of suffering like they had. We see in the gospels that Jesus knew even before he got to Jerusalem that his disciples would face physical suffering. He knew that when they reached Jerusalem and the trials there, the disciples would be tempted to lose heart and give up. So, Jesus prepared them. The disciples would need to know what Habakkuk knew, what Jesus knew. They would need to know how to pray, how to stay the course, how to seek justice and how to live by faith...despite suffering.

Jesus tells the disciples parables to help them think and problem solve and learn. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells about a woman who faces daily injustice. Jesus doesn't tell them what kind. They hear how she fights to be heard relentlessly. Luke 18:1-8 (NRSV) reads,

18 Then Jesus^[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ^[b] ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This woman in this parable fights to be vindicated by a Roman judge whose only form of justice is deciding who can pay him more money. He cares not what God or other people think. The woman is helpless and defenseless but she does not give up. She becomes so annoying in her persistence, the judge finally relents and gives her what she needs.

I am reminded of the story in Genesis when Jacob goes to see his brother Esau after many years of estranged living. Jacob had tricked Esau out of his inheritance. The night before he was to see Esau, a man comes to where Jacob is camping and wrestles with him all night. Jacob would not let him go until he blessed him even when the man deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint. Eventually, the man does bless Jacob, names him Israel, the God-Wrestler, for Jacob had seen God face to face and lived. It is that kind of persistence the woman had with the judge. That is the kind of prayer Jesus tells his disciples to cultivate.

There are so many people who cry to the Lord. We sometimes feel we are caught in the middle of a cosmic war like Habakkuk. Someone mentioned that to me just last week. "It's like we are living in a war but cannot see the enemy?" Systemic struggles are struggles against an enemy we cannot see and the temptation is to blame everyone we can see. But, cosmic wars are not solved overnight or by individuals alone. They are solved by prayer together. We must wait upon the Lord. We must be persistent.

Do I dare even name some of the people I know who have been praying? We have a prayer team who prays weekly and daily for the struggles we go through here at First Pres and in our extended lives. In my past, I knew a woman who was ill and could not speak out against theft against her and neglect by her caregivers. Her rights for dignity and peace were at times denied. Children who live away from elderly parents often worry about these things. Thankfully,

because the righteous live by faith, there are groups that can help like Faith in Action, or Family Services. Champaign Urbana has great programs for seniors but we must remain vigilant because even in our midst there are seniors who need help. And, we the church through our prayers and our cries keep the cries of the defenseless loud until God can act.

There are homeless who have no mailing address and therefore cannot receive federal aid, or child care, or fill out a job application. When they cannot get a job, they fall into a hopeless cycle of dead ends that breed violence, desperation and crime. Their cries are often silent because we do not live near them or see them. It takes dramatic events like abuse and murders to wake up our communities to hear their distress. We must join their cries and wait upon the Lord.

There are impoverished countries who struggle to become a player in this global economy who are dependent upon the generosity and economic health of richer, more powerful nations. The PCUSA in its mission agencies stand with them. We have mission partners in Indonesia, South Sudan, Congo, Mexico, Cuba and the PCUSA has even more than that spring up when disasters hit. (The Methodists and Lutherans have the same kind of mission partnerships.) And, we partner with the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches and Church World Service. We live in a time in which there is huge anti-institutional sentiment. But, there is a place for institutions and the institutional church when it comes to the cries of those who cannot be heard. There are moments when the unity of the Christian church really does show itself to be the body of Christ acting in the world. The righteous live by faith.

God told Habakkuk to wait. Jesus tells the disciples to wait but not in a passive way. Wait like this tenacious woman! Do not lose heart! The disciples

needed to know how to pray with prayer that is constant, badgering, and seeks justice. So do we.

When the community comes together in prayer, we give our children the opportunity to know God. Prayer, meditation, and spirituality are all things that are frequently kept quiet or cerebral in our everyday worldly conversations. In our adult world, such things are channeled into very private, personal, structured events for which there is very little time. As God's children we need love and trust, to have purpose and learn wisdom, and to be known by God. If we come to faith like a child but have no modelling for how to have a relationship with God, how are we to learn? How are we to learn that having a relationship with God is different than magic or different than social humanitarian action? Without this relationship how are we to stand up to the enemies that assail us? How are we to know God is present? How do we not lose heart?

In the church through baptism we enter into this act of praying and waiting as a community through the lives of those who enter as children and as newcomers. We keep at it through each generation that enters into our fold. Whenever I participate in the sacrament of baptism, which we hope to celebrate in our near future, I am reminded of our commitment and responsibility to help our baptized live by faith and wait upon the Lord. I am reminded of these building blocks that they need from us to develop their faith. They need attention, love and nurture. They need limits and boundaries. They need opportunities to develop their imagination allowing them bring about new worlds. They need Christ. Christ welcomed and loved the children, those young and those young at heart. Through Christ we can learn to trust. Christ came to fulfill the law and teach its fundamental purpose. Through Christ we can learn self-control. Christ came to create a new world. Through Christ we can learn to make wise decisions

as whole and integrated persons. Christ came to introduce us to God who loves us. We can be hopeful and passionate about our future in Christ.

I found a poem that captures this hopeful waiting recently called Before the Rain. It was written by Lianne Spidel, a poet from Ohio.

Minutes before the rain begins
I always waken, listening
to the world hold its breath,
as if a phone had rung once in a far
room or a door had creaked in the darkness.
Perhaps the genes of some forebear
startle me, some tribal warrior,
keeping watch on some crag beside a loch,
miserable in the cold,
though I think it is a woman's waiting
I have come to know,
a Loyalist hiding in the woods,
muffling the coughing of her child
against her linen skirts, her dark head
bent over his, her fear spent
somewhere else in time,
leaving only this waiting,
and I hope she escaped
with her child, and I suppose she did.
If not, I wouldn't be lying here awake,
Alive, listening for the rain to begin
So that she can run, the sound
Of her footsteps lost, the sight
Of them blotted away on the path.

(Poetry Foundation,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/40562>)

Stand your watch post, whether it be in the darkest of nights in the rain or as you nurture the child or grandchild in your life or the new immigrant who enters into your community to meet the struggles that life will bring. Write down

God's vision as Habakkuk did. The righteous shall live by faith. Pray with hope, do not lose heart. For if the judge who was unrighteous finally gave justice to the nagging woman, so our God who loves us dearly will even more readily draw near to us. Baptism signifies this promise of God to us. God loves us and always will love us, even when we are small and despised, children and defenseless, even when we are adults who feel small and despised, and defenseless. God through the power of the Holy Spirit gives us love, affection and nurture. Wait, watch, be hopeful, don't lose heart. The blessing will come. We know that our God is a loving God who walks with us.