Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 (NRSVUE)

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

[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.

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 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 faithfulness.

Change on the Wind

How many of you have ever heard a sermon on Habakkuk? How many of you have ever heard of Habakkuk? To many of you, it seems, I'm the one to introduce you to the incredible world of the Minor Prophets. I'm so excited to do that, especially with such a text as this. The Minor Prophets are a collection of prophets, naturally, that are included in the latter portion of the Old Testament. They're called "minor" not because they're "lesser," but to distinguish them

from the "Major" (or as some might say, long-winded) prophets: Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. They are the voices of the Israelites, and they speak to and for God to their contemporaries. Though they're often overlooked, they hold the rich history of the Israelites and their relationship, their covenant, with God.

Before we even begin to dive into the text for this morning, I'd like to first ask a question. How many of us feel some resonance with this text? Habakkuk asks some big questions. How long, God, will you make me see the evils in the world? How long will I cry out before you answer? How long will justice fail to be served? How long, God, will we suffer before we're washed away entirely? I think it's easy to read this passage and feel something or some way about it.

We know virtually nothing about Habakkuk, the person behind this book that bears his name. We see him named twice, in the first verses of chapters 1 and 3. Where he came from, his family, his occupation, his lineage, or anything else apart from his name, we have nothing on. However, the fact that this book exists, and the style that it's written in, indicates that Habakkuk was closely associated with the temple, and therefore associated with prophecy.[1] What he was prophesying *about*, too, gives us a glimpse into when, where, and how he lived and prophesied.

In chapter 1, verse 6, the Babylonians are specifically mentioned as a "ruthless and impetuous people."[2] The Babylonians were a sort of ancient superpower at the time, themselves having been established in 625 BCE, when they were established as an independent state from the Assyrian Empire, who were the previous power players for over a century. By 605 BCE, the Assyrian Empire had been soundly defeated by Egypt, leaving their lands for Babylon to snatch up. At that time, all of Ancient Palestine was subject to Babylonian control.[3] As such, we can date the book to a rough range between 605 BCE, around the time of the conquest of Judea by Babylon, and 539 BCE, when Persia superseded the Babylonians as the preeminent world power.

Whenever it was written, we can gather that it was during a time of great political and emotional turmoil for Habakkuk's people. This is apparent even in the text itself: even without any of that context, we can gather that all was not right at the time. It is clear that Habakkuk, the prophet of God's people, is lamenting the situation of the people of God: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?" You don't exactly ask these questions when everything's coming up roses.

These are profound questions to God, and it goes even deeper than we realize here. The people are crying out to God for help, but they haven't yet received a response. Habakkuk addresses God directly, then voices a complaint, saying first, "How long, O Lord?" then naming specifically the ways that he and his people have been aggrieved: they "see wrongdoing and look

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[1]S.D. Snyman, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 1. The prophet Habakkuk, accessed October 2, https://research.ebsco.com/c/275eek/ebook-viewer/epub/lv5ftecspz/section/navPoint-27.

[2] Habakkuk 1:6, NRSVUE. All quotations of the Bible use the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition unless otherwise noted.

[3] Snyman, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 2. Dating the book.

at trouble … (and) destruction and violence are before (them).” This is a call for justice that “never prevails.” This is an honest lament at the violence that the people are facing every day.

And so, I. Habakkuk 1:4, “the law becomes slack.” In Hebrew, that’s תָּפוּג תּוֹרָה (*tapug Torah*). That word *tapug*, “becomes slack,” can also be translated as “fails,” like supports that give out. The word translated as “law” doesn’t just mean statutes and ordinances, but it’s a word heavy with connotations and meaning. The word is “Torah.” As in, the Word of God, the boundaries of the covenant that God cut with Israel. Put it all together and hear the text again: “Your Law, God, your Word, your *promise* to us, has failed.” Justice has been perverted, so there is no justice at all. People bury their heads in the sand, and the occupiers of the land where Habakkuk lives tell the Israelites “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.[4]

Habakkuk is a text about a prophet crying out to God on behalf of his community. Habakkuk is a text about a real, despairing anger at the God in charge of everything. Habakkuk is a text about what happens when a people is pushed to the brink, and everything is going wrong, and we lash out at anything in an attempt to quell our anxiety and fears. The prophet cries out to God, wishing to hear something, *anything*, that could make sense of the pain and suffering that he’s seeing and experiencing. And it sounds like he’s gotten only silence so far.

I want to pause for a minute. I recognize that such questions can be unsettling to us. But I also want to recognize that many of us have asked similar questions, ourselves. We may have been taught not to question God. But here, Habakkuk questions God’s response and presence. Dr. Tyler Mayfield, Old Testament scholar and professor at Louisville Seminary, writes that “the language of lament is the language of honesty.”[5] Where is the God of justice, Habakkuk asks, who “works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed?”[6] His emotions imply that he has been asking these questions for a while. God’s justice has been perverted, and distorted justice is certainly not justice. And Habakkuk, seeing all this and saying all this, goes to his watchpost and watches and waits for God to respond.

And God does.

How does God respond to Habakkuk? What does God say in the face of what is certainly dancing on the line of blasphemy, if it hasn’t already crossed into that territory?

God acknowledges the prophet. God responds directly to Habakkuk, not with anger or fury or indignance, but with compassion. God says, “There is still a vision.” In the words of Sam Cooke, a change is gonna come.

Indeed, there is a vision! It is so good, that it must be written down! Write it down clearly, Habakkuk, so that a runner might read it. Despite the violence that rages around, despite the destructive nature of the present moment, a new moment is coming. Though the prophet may see the violence, this is not the whole picture. The wicked, the proud, the oppressors, will not get the final word. Violence is not the only option. According to the vision that God has, evil will not

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[4] Jeremiah 6:14

[5] Tyler Mayfield, Commentary on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, for *Working Preacher*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-3/commentary-on-habakkuk-11-4-21-4-11.

[6] Psalm 103:6.

win. According to the vision that God has, destruction will not persist. According to the vision that God has, we shall overcome. A change is coming on the wind, and how things are is not how they will be.

Righteousness will prevail.

But, God says, we may need to wait for this vision to unfold. In replying to Habakkuk, God does acknowledges the realities of the goings on in the area: the wicked indeed surround the righteous, and judgment comes forth the reality. God also implies that that the current reality, unacceptable as it is, is not easily or quickly transformed. It will require waiting, and it will require doing. But rest assured, there is still a vision for the appointed time; it will surely come. It will not delay.

How does God's reply end this morning? With a declaration that "the righteous live by their faithfulness." This works both ways: as Paul wrote to the Romans[7] and the Galatians,[8] the righteous live by their faithfulness, so the righteousness of God is revealed through our faith. As God says to Habakkuk this morning, though, we learn that although our faith reveals God's righteousness, it is God's righteousness that gives us faith. In turn, the righteous trust God. Friends, this is faith: trust in the promises of God. Trust that God has not abandoned us. Trust that God is still on the side of good, trust that God is still working within each of us, and trust that God's promises will not fail.

I know how hard it can be to trust in this at times. Especially as Habakkuk did, as we do today, when we live in a violent time, when more violence is threatened every day. When many are afraid to worship in public, to go to the grocery store, to send our children to school, without knowing if we, if they, will ever come back. There is violence in the world. But, there is also God. In Christ, we know that he is Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us today, here and now. We must have faith that God will remain with us. God has promised this to us, and God keeps God's promises.

There is one last though that I had. Notice that, in all of what Habakkuk says, God does not rebuke the prophet. God does not chastize, or blame, or say "How dare you?" But God is still there. God hears, and soothes, and though there is not *immediate* relief to the suffering, God notices, and remains with us. I'm reminded of an image from the book of Revelation, which proclaims that in the new heaven and new earth, "God will wipe away every tear" from our eyes.[9] Of course, in God's time, in God's visions, in the kingdom of God that is coming, there will be no more tears, and there will be no reason for anyone to cry. But the reality is that we cry now. The God of Habakkuk knows this. The God of Paul sees this. And the God of our years is still present with us. God wipes every tear away from our eyes even now. God's steadfast love endures forever. In the midst of our questions, and challenges,

We must have faith that the kingdom of God is at hand. There is absolutely still evil in the world. There is violence against people who have done nothing but live their own lives. There is anger, directed at anyone who is unfortunate enough to simply be present, misplaced and

[7] Romans 1:17.
[8] Galatians 3:11.
[9] Revelation 21:4.

misdirected by those who seek to divide us. The greedy gain more power and wealth, disregarding the poor and displaced and pitting neighbor against neighbor in the process. As a result of this, there is fear. Still, we must remember that God is with us. This is where faith comes in.

Christ teaches his disciples and us that with faith the size of a mustard seed, we can uproot a mulberry tree and cast it into the sea. Christ teaches his disciples that faith that small is enough to sustain. With faith the size of a mustard seed, we have enough to carry on, even when we cannot see God. Even when we cannot feel God, faith reminds us that God is still present. Amidst our wrestling with the world, with injustice, and indeed, with God, we are never alone. God does not forsake us, and all things will be made right in God's time.

Such is the life of faith: to live in the between of complaint and struggle, and God's right time. As we struggle with injustice against crooked judgments, as we fight and pray and work and lead one another, together into the light of God, let us remember that the new heaven and the new earth are at hand. Let us go into that light with faith, remembering that, even when we cannot see God, our faith sustains.

Although our reading ends at this verse, Habakkuk doesn't. I'd like to read you the final three verses this morning:

> "Though the fig tree does not blossom
> and no fruit is on the vines…
> yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
> I will exult in the God of my salvation.
> God, the Lord, is my strength;
> he makes my feet like the feet of a deer
> and makes me tread upon the heights."[10]

If nothing else, let us remember this: even when the trees do not bloom, even when even when justice fails, let us still rejoice in God. Let us know, and help one another to remember, that Jesus is Lord, that God is with us, and that the Holy Spirit sustains even when we cannot go on. If God is love, if faith is righteous, let us be loving and righteous to one another. Let us live into our faith each day. Let us remember the change that is coming for all of us. Let us remember that Christ is making all things new. Let us then be made new in kind.

To God be the glory. Amen.

Charge and Blessing: May God be a beacon to you in the dark, that you may shine your light of faith over those who need it most. May the Holy Spirit pour through you, lifting up those who have been cast aside by society. And may the peace, grace, and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with and within you, now and always.

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[10] Habakkuk 3:17a, 18-19.