

Our Joy in Difficult Times
A Sermon on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 by the Rev. Philip Major
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The story of Holy Scripture is a story of the struggle for justice, freedom and goodness for all of God's people. We read this story in the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a story of God's care for all people, especially those who are suffering from illness, hunger, poverty or violence.

The story of the struggle for justice, freedom and goodness for all people is told in different ways in the different books of the Bible. Last Sunday we heard Jesus deliver a sermon that began with this memorable verse: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.*

Today we hear another perspective on the struggle in the words of the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet who lived about six hundred years before the birth of Christ, at the same time as the prophet Jeremiah. If you are trying to recall the last time you heard anything about Habakkuk, it might help to know that today's passage is the only passage from Habakkuk in our entire three-year cycle of scripture readings. One reason for this is that Habakkuk is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Nevertheless, Habakkuk's perspective and words are extremely helpful and relevant for us.

The book of Habakkuk begins with a lamentation, a cry for help: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?* This is unusual, even surprising. In most of the books of the prophets, the prophet shares God's perspective with the community of the faithful. In today's passage we hear the prophet arguing with 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? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Habakkuk is arguing with God about the injustice in the world. When we read the book of Habakkuk we find several clues that tell us the kind of injustice that was so disturbing to him.

Habakkuk is a that has clues to exactly where and when and why it was written. From these details we know that Habakkuk was a prophet, perhaps one connected to the Temple in Jerusalem. He lived in Judah and was describing activity that was about to happen in the year 604, so just a little bit more than 600 years before the birth of Christ.

So, in the year 605, or perhaps in the first months of 604, Habakkuk complains to God: *Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me.* For people who study the Hebrew Scriptures, this phrase 'Destruction and violence' refer to a specific type of destruction and violence.

Habakkuk is not complaining about an increase in burglaries or auto theft. The destruction and violence are being done by the people who have the greatest power to inflict destruction and violence: the king and the officers of the king's government. The king of Judah has forced his own people to build a lavish new palace for himself, and he withheld wages from the laborers. This is the wrong-doing that is so troubling to Habakkuk.

Jeremiah makes the very same accusation against the same king, King Jehoiakim. King Jehoiakim was accumulating tremendous amounts of wealth through abuse of his power. Our translation says, *Destruction and violence are before me*, but a better translation for us today might be *Plunder and violence are before me*. The king and other government officials are plundering, taking money from the people they are supposed to be serving.

The next verse also has a very specific meaning. *Strife and contention arise*. Jehoiakim is not talking about neighbors arguing with each other. The Hebrew words come from the court system and refer to corrupt use of the courts by the strong to press charges against the weak and those who cannot defend themselves in court.

Strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The threat does not come from outside the kingdom of Judah. The threat comes from the rulers of Judah. *The wicked*

surround the righteous-so that justice is perverted. This is Habakkuk's primary complaint, and it's a complaint against God. *The wicked surround the righteous-so that justice is perverted.*

Habakkuk is discouraged, and for good reason. This wasn't just Habakkuk's opinion. The corruption of the king of Judah, and his oppressive treatment of the poor is described in other books of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the book of Kings and Jeremiah.

We don't hear the entire argument, going back and forth between Habakkuk and God, in today's passage. But we hear part of God's response: *Write the vision; make it plain on tablets. Write it down so that those who read it will run and share the good news. For there is still a vision for the appointed time. The vision describes what will happen in the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them; they are weak and empty. But the righteous live by their faith.*

Holy Scripture is the story of the struggle for justice, freedom and goodness for all of God's people. In Holy Scripture the struggle for justice for all people is the primary concern.

The story of salvation includes years and decades when we argue with God about the injustice we see in the world. God is like the parent who has a healthy, intelligent relationship with their child. God is glad for us to argue, as long as the argument is about compassion and care for God's people.

The story of salvation reminds us to keep our eyes on the big picture. The big picture is that God's plan for us is love, freedom, and goodness. The big picture is that you and I were created out of love, and for the purposes of love.

The story of salvation helps us understand the struggle is continuous. There are many people making mistakes, including us, so the struggle is continuous. Being faithful means not giving up on each other when things get difficult during the long, continuous struggle.

In the story of salvation we see that love and joy and hope are found in the middle of the struggle, even in the middle of the terrible times. Someone else pointed out the connection between our passage from Habakkuk and a poem written by Wendell Berry. It's found in his book, *The Country of Marriage*. Wendell Berry describes the way we find love and joy in the middle of difficult times: *Love the world. Love someone who does not deserve it. Practice resurrection. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.*

The story of salvation helps us remember we cannot survive alone. We cannot thrive, we cannot be faithful on our own. God has gathered us together in this place for a reason. The struggle is eventually overwhelming for us as individuals. We have to turn toward one another for encouragement and wisdom. The joy, the hope, the love are found only in community, only in working together. We have to work together and stick together in order to be faithful. So I pray this prayer for us as the church of God's people.

God who can do all things, make us a channel of your peace. Make us a channel of your justice and compassion. Form us in your image of health, creativity and mercy. Open our eyes to the injustice being done in the world. Give us strength and wisdom to be instruments of your love. Give us grace to care for your people as you have cared for us. Knit us together as the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord.