Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Wait For It!”* Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

These opening verses from the Book of Habakkuk sound very contemporary. Indeed, it sounds as though it could have been written yesterday. The truth and the way of living with compassion and integrity—as is described and defined in the Torah—was being ignored, even disrespected. Habakkuk has had enough of it, but he is also bewildered and angry that God has not intervened in the life of the community.

That is why his book opens with the complaint we heard. God has allowed Habakkuk to see all of this corruption and wrong-doing and he wants to know why. Why must he look upon such faithlessness?

At this point, I wish we had been able to listen to the whole book—All of Habakkuk, it is really very short, just three chapters. I wish we had heard more of the book for a couple of reasons. First, because (as I said) it is a short book and we do not get to hear from this prophet very often.

Second, because there is a part of the story that is missing from the eight verses we heard just now. In the verses that fill-out the remaining part of chapter one, we hear God’s first response to Habakkuk—God’s answer to Habakkuk’s question “How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?” [v.2]

In the remaining verses of chapter one, God tells Habakkuk that God is going to see to it that the wicked Habakkuk is so vehemently offended by are going to be punished. God is going to send the Babylonians to invade and punish them. The Babylonians will be the instrument that will punish the ones Habakkuk has so passionately denounced.

Whoa! What - Wait a minute, says Habakkuk—apparently, God’s answer is not at all satisfying. Now, these stories from the Bible are so ancient that we do not always get the full impact of what we are hearing or read. So, just in case you missed the implications of this part of Habakkuk’s story, I came across a writer who put this situation into modern terms like this:

Imagine for a moment that you are a citizen of Ukraine back before anyone has any idea that Russia is going to invade your country. As a follower of Jesus, you notice some things in your society that trouble you — some of the things you see are fast dealing and unjust actions by some of your fellow citizens that take advantage of other people, and they seem to be getting away with it. So, you pray, saying, “Lord, how long are you going to let this go on, with bad people making good people suffer?”

And then God answers you: “They aren’t going to get away with it for long. Vladimir Putin’s troops are coming, and they will disrupt everything.”

You are thunderstruck! “Oh no, Lord! Why would you allow a country that is worse than us to invade us?” This is what was happening with Habakkuk.

We do not yet know how Russia’s war against Ukraine will end, but if you substitute Judah for Ukraine, and Chaldeans (Babylonians) for Russia, you basically have the prophet Habakkuk’s circumstances. He knew some of this fellow Judahites were not living up to the covenant with God and were mistreating others, and he wanted God to intervene. But when God told him the Babylonians were marching against Judah, Habakkuk was overwhelmed with dismay. The prophet had wanted God to turn up the heat a bit on the Judahite wrongdoers, but not to dump them out of the frying pan and into the fire!

As Habakkuk put it, “Why would you look at the treacherous or keep silent when the wicked swallows one who is *more* righteous?” [1:13]. This is the same question Habakkuk has asked in the first place, but now the stakes are even higher. His predicament, and that of his people, is not only more dark and more hostile, it now threatens to destroy everything he has worked for, and all he has known.

This is not what he wants! And he makes this, too, known to God. He tells God that it should be impossible for God to even look upon such corruption and violence that is embodied in the Babylonians, let along use them as an instrument of punishment against the people God loves and has redeemed.

And so, in chapter two, we find him resolutely demanding another answer from God. He wants to know how and why this is going to happen to him and the people. As chapter two opens, we find Habakkuk in a watchtower. The prophet describes himself as standing at a watch post, meaning that he is waiting for God’s answer to why the Babylonian bad guys will be allowed to overrun the Judahite not-quite-as-bad guys.

God does get back to him, but not with an answer, for God does not explain God’s actions to Habakkuk (just as God seldom supplies any of us with “explanations” about God’s deeds.) But God does give Habakkuk the assurance that he can continue, even in the face of trouble. In fact, what is described to us in those first four verses in chapter two is God’s advice on how to go on living in such a climate of corruption and wrong-doing *and* in a climate of judgement and loss (which is what will happen when the Babylonians make their appearance.).

Part of what Habakkuk and the people should do is something Habakkuk is already doing: he is living in expectation that God is going to do something to save and protect the people. He is so certain that God will provide the guidance and assistance they need that he has very deliberately positioned himself on a rampart to wait and watch.

The life of the people is very important and so he *expects* an answer. Many people would look at the situation and assume that God has abandoned them. Not so with Habakkuk. He *believes* that God is going to do something for them, and he is not afraid to complain to God until it happens. Moreover, when he does not like the answer he has been given, he returns to ask for something better.

In both the actions of Habakkuk and God, we find our own answer to the kind of losses we, too, have experienced in our own context. Even though we are separated from Habakkuk and his people by culture, geography, and much more than two thousand years, it seems that human nature continues to retreat from progress in compassion, truth, and understanding for one another. We seem to regularly forget how to be respectful and even reverent toward honesty, justice, and kindness. We forget how cultivate these important things.

Our good news is that God can and will overcome our forgetfulness.

Our good news is that there will always be at least one person who will stand up and refuse to be pushed back into a world without honor and peace and justice. There will still be people like Habakkuk who will not let God rest but will demand an answer. Even better news is that Habakkuk and people like him will not take no for an answer. They will demand God’s attention and will not rest until God responds.

Our final bit of good news is that God continues to listen for our cries of help, and even if we do not recognize it or understand it when it comes, God is always at work, always finding ways to get our attention, and always ready and willing to respond to our needs.

That is what Habakkuk is meant to show us: that even in bad times, times of confusion and the loss of security and certainty about the future, people like he never stop actively waiting on God. That is: they do not just complain and forget it. They do not just complain and assume no one is listening.

Quite the contrary, Habakkuk teaches us that while we wait on God, we need to build our own ramparts, our watchtowers on which to stand vigil. This is what faithful living looks like. It is active and consistent.

For us, our watchtowers are found:

* in patience and in prayer,
* in learning as much as we can about the world around us—in ferreting out the truth if we have to,
* in continuing to show compassion and friendship towards others,
* in continuing to cultivate faithfulness in others by sharing our own stories of struggle and the joys we have also received,
* by listening to others’ stories of struggle and triumph,
* in remaining vigilant when it comes to truth-telling, and recognizing and pointing out falsehood.

The most important thing to take away from Habakkuk’s story is that his response to God's message is not simply one of resignation at events he cannot control, but a dynamic trust in an active God, in spite of events and circumstances that might call God’s own self into question if those circumstances alone were the measure of God in the world.

Indeed, the prophet himself had already done that very thing. But he has encountered God on a level that provides him the stability to face an unstable world. And from this stability, this rampart of our own where we, too, are waiting, we can find the strength that will make us faithful as we meet again the God who is faithful and active on our behalf—the God who loves us.

Amen.