Write the Vision

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

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

*Then the Lord answered me and said, Write a vision, and make it plain upon a tablet so that a runner can read it. There is still a vision for the appointed time; it testifies to the end; it does not deceive.*

 *Habakkuk 2:2-3*

 On Sunday evening, I was sitting in my living room, watching one of my must-sees on the boob tube, *Sixty Minutes.* The cast of reporters has changed over the years, but the infotainment has not ceased to be top notch. This past Sunday, one of the segments dealt with the death of the Saudi newsman, Jamal Khashoggi. We are coming up to the anniversary of his brutal killing in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. Many people, I include myself, believe this was a premeditated assassination by the Saudi ruler,  [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, seen as the country's most powerful figure](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40354415). Nothing happens of this magnitude politically without his knowledge or consent. The interviewer pressed the crown prince in the one-on-one interview, but the ruler was quite smooth and almost believable. He answered with a seeming sincerity, such that, if one did not know the circumstances, one would almost come away from the interview believing the man. Almost.

 There is so much evil in our world. Salman will, in all likelihood, get away with murder. He is not the only one who plays fast and loose with the laws to which we want to think all persons are accountable. Politicians do it all the time, foreign and domestic. And we who believe in a righteous God fall on our knees and ask, *How can our God of justice permit such bad behavior? Why does God allow evil to dominate human affairs?*

 We are not the only ones who are perplexed by this state of affairs. When I taught an introductory course on religion, I told my students that I believe all religions seek to answer three fundamental questions common to humankind. The three questions are these:

* Is there a God, and if God exists, how would this God be described?
* What is the nature of the good life?
* Why does evil exist in a world in which God exists?

That third question is based on a conundrum that can be stated in this way: God, we of the Judeo-Christian tradition believe, is an all-loving and all-powerful God. If this is so, then why does evil exist? Either evil exists because God can’t prevent it, meaning God is not all-powerful. Or, evil exists because God could prevent it but allows it to happen, which means God is not all-loving.

 It is not surprising then that the writers of the Bible struggle with the existence of evil in the world. That’s at the heart of the reading from Habakkuk this morning. The prophet angrily questions God: 2O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? 3Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted. [Habakkuk 1:2-4]

 In many ways, these verses strike at the heart of what it means to have a relationship with God. The first thing I want you to note is that Habakkuk has it out with God. He is filled with rage because of all that is happening around him. He does not mince words; he’s angry and he wants God to know it. He feels God could, if God wanted to, deliver justice. And I want you to understand with all your heart, with all the confidence in the world, that it’s okay with God that Habakkuk vents in this way. In fact, I would go so far as to say God encourages you to vent your spleen at God. It is true in all human relationships. You look at good, stable marriages, for example. No matter how strong the bond of love between two people, conflicts, disagreements, and anger inevitably arise. It is only when the relationship is strong and stable that, and the commitment is firm, such that when these conflicts arise, they can be candid and express themselves, as long as the expression is not violent and they fight fair. Conversely, if the relationship is fragile, one or the other is afraid to express anger, lest the relationship disintegrates and falls apart. God does not rebuke Habakkuk’s anger; God responds.

 In his book *Lament for a Son,* theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff shares about the loss of his son in a tragic climbing accident in Austria. Like most parents who lose a child, Wolterstoff went to a dark place, as sorrow and depression consumed him. In the book, he shares this intimate thought: “Will my eyes adjust to this darkness? Will I find you [God] in the dark – not in the streaks of light which remain, but in the darkness. . . And are there songs for singing when the light has gone dim? Or in the dark, is it best to wait in silence?”

 Habakkuk asks the two big questions most of us ask when we are in the dark places: *how long?* And *why?* The answers don’t come easily and immediately. Thus, in chapter 2, we find Habakkuk waiting. We do not know how long it was or what transpired in between the complaint and God’s response. But the prophet waited on the Lord, as we all must. And God answers:

*Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so the one who runs may read it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.* [Habakkuk 2:2-3]

 Kinda strange answer, isn’t it? Habakkuk asks God why evil seems to prevail, and God responds by telling him to share God’s vision with others. No rational, theological explanation of evil and why evil prevails. Just “write the vision, make it plain.” Curious.

 Here’s why God does this, I believe. You don’t overcome evil in the world simply by railing against it. It may do you some good to vent, but it will not change the reality. Rather, God is saying faithfulness requires us who seek to follow God to offer the world an alternative to the way the world is, to declare a vision of how we see God intended the world to be.

 I remind you of that great big theological word I introduced you to a few weeks back, ***prolepsis.*** I shared how it means we live as if the reign of God is a present reality, all the time acknowledging that it clearly isn’t. But we choose to live in that reality we long for to be present, although it isn’t. Habakkuk is told by God, *share that vision of that coming reality and moreover, live as if it has already appeared.*

 When we gather at the communion table, as we will momentarily, we are declaring to the world that we have made the choice. The words of the Great Thanksgiving that I share each time we come to the table implores: “We bless you for the beauty and bounty of the earth and for the vision of the day when sharing by all means scarcity for none.” We realize that kind of sharing is not a reality in our day, even for us. But it is the vision we live into, by declaring the vision, and living as if this is our reality.

 Write the vision. Make it plain. That is our calling. That is our truth. Amen.