

Sermon

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.
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 wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous;
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
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.
Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
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.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faithfulness.

As Bethany shared as our service began, we're exploring UMC Heartstrings this month. What are we passionate about? We've already heard from Bethany, we've sung our passions with Evelyn and Meredith, reflected on family and identity with Jim and Doug's words, and here I hope I can offer a sermon message from my own heartstrings.

When I mentioned to Bethany that I had chosen to center my sermon in the Old Testament lectionary text of Habakkuk, she chuckled and reminded me that during a recent Sunday school time, Ruth Kitchin Tillman had said that none of us really know what Habakkuk says. Which is probably true, even for those of us with biblical training. So perhaps an intro to Habakkuk is a good place to begin.

The short book of Habakkuk is part of what Christians refer to as the Old Testament, otherwise known as the Hebrew Bible. It is part of what gets categorized as prophetic books, and poor Habakkuk gets sub-categorized as a minor prophet. On top of that, almost nothing is known about the person of Habakkuk other than what is found in these few verses. But don't write off his words so quickly. His writings are claimed as sacred by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Rastafarianism.

Prophetic texts were written to speak truth or warning to the people of a certain time - in Habakkuk's case, around 600 BCE - but with lasting wisdom that has carried on through generations. Habakkuk grapples with questions of justice and human suffering. It opens with Habakkuk's lament to God, questioning why evil and injustice continue without any divine intervention. God responds, revealing that the ruthless Babylonians will be used to punish Judah. This response bothers Habakkuk, who then struggles with the paradox of God using unrighteous people to execute justice. The book wraps up with God's assurance that ultimately, justice will prevail when the righteous live out their faith. The text ends with Habakkuk's powerful prayer of faith despite the ongoing turmoil. Some scholars believe the final chapter was written as song lyrics to be sung with a hopeful conclusion after his previous laments.

Habakkuk, like us, wrestled with the injustice of his day. He witnessed the suffering of innocent people, and questioned what seemed like silence from God. "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" he laments in chapter 1. "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?"

Sound familiar? In our own time, we see a world grappling with systems that perpetuate inequality, where marginalized folks often bear the brunt of hatred and discrimination. For the migrant, the chronically ill or impoverished, our LGBTQ+ siblings, those with skin that is not classified as "white," the struggle for full recognition, for safety, and for love without reservation is an ongoing battle. We see legislative attacks, increased hate speech, and the very real fear that acceptance can be fleeting. It feels, at times, as if the tide is turning against progress toward God's justice.

This week I spent some time thinking about the concept of an "extinction burst." This is a concept, borrowed from psychology, that describes the phenomenon where a behavior, when it's about to be extinguished, flares up intensely one last time. Think of a child throwing a massive tantrum when they realize their usual tactic is no longer working. Or a dying star burning brighter than ever before its final collapse.

We see this in American history, that when society starts to turn toward a more inclusive or just new reality, there is one final resistant push that feels even stronger than the movement it comes from. The end of the civil war gave birth to organizations like United Daughters of the Confederacy, and boosted participation in the KKK. The 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, caused a strong backlash from traditionalists fearing the breakdown of family structures and power systems. Our increasing national diversity and first black and biracial president led to the Alt-Right and a renewed a modern white supremacy movement. Years of advocacy for LGBT inclusion has led to national efforts to strip rights and vilify that same group of people.

I think I've shared this story before, but during my time as a campus pastor the head of the LGBT student center let me know that the creation of Receiving with Thanksgiving, Penn State's first LGBT Christian organization, led to a significant rise in the amount of Christian groups who started pushing conversion therapy and verbalizing God's wrath against those with certain "lifestyles." With a grimace he told me that Christian inclusion signaled a turning point that required those not yet there to dig in even deeper. "It's ironic," he told me, "but your work at inclusion has increased resistance, no doubt as one final effort to push back against a turning tide."

Ugh. Feeling any closer to Habakkuk? "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"

But rather than focusing on the resistance, what if we took this as a sign of significant change? Could it be that the intense backlash we see against inclusion, against the rights of our LGBT or migrant communities - simply to exist - is not a sign of defeat, but a signal of sorts? Signs of a desperate, final surge of resistance from systems and ideologies that are, in fact, losing their power.

Habakkuk, after his lament, waits for God's reply, and in chapter 2, he receives it: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets... For the revelation awaits an appointed time... Though it will linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." And then, the powerful declaration: "the righteous will live by their faithfulness."

Habakkuk's prophetic words are not a call to passive waiting, but to active, steadfast faith. It's an affirmation that despite the temporary darkness, despite the furious "extinction bursts" of injustice, the ultimate arc of history is still on the right path. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so eloquently reminded us many years ago, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

And so, while at times it feels counter to the direction of the daily newscycle, I continue to hold out hope that God is present in our world today. And that the Spirit's movement is part of just that. I choose to have faith that change is near. I choose to believe that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

Sometimes it helps to zoom out a little from our own timeline. So often we focus on the minutia of our daily lives. We scroll through live updates and headlines that make us feel like the end is near. But we forget to zoom out to remember how things really have changed for the better over time.

Of course this change does not happen on its own. It bends because people of faith and good conscience join God's Spirit to push it, pull it, and sometimes, with great effort, embrace humanity in the direction of love and equity. For our marginalized siblings, this means not only offering an affirmation within our own walls but standing in solidarity with them in the public square, advocating for their full human rights, and dismantling the prejudice that seeks to diminish their worth. It means standing with the migrant worker, the immigrant, LGBT persons, people with different skin colors, the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish neighbor, who feels more vulnerable now than they perhaps did just a few years ago.

So how do we remain hopeful amid these extinction bursts that come with so much pain? For me, it's about sharing with each other when we notice glimmers of hope.

Our family arrived in State College a decade ago. At that time I only remember one downtown church with a visible rainbow flag. I'm now aware of several, including our own building right here on Norma Street. When we arrived there was a small group of folks gathering under the Interfaith Initiative of Centre County, a small but passionate group working at interfaith dialog. Ten years later there is a growing network of interfaith clergy who are not just chatting, but sparking initiatives like the Interfaith Coalition for Gun Safety, the Rapid Response Network, weekly protests about the violence in Gaza and the Ukraine, a movement to shutter the Moshannon facility, and even a network of LGBT clergy advocates who show up and stand up for this region. While it is true that there is a federal movement underway to shut down anything tied to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, all that seems to do is remind those who work in those spaces how important it is to continue to expand their reach and effort.

As I was flipping through my notes I discovered that a theologian I read this week in preparation used to attend Pasadena Mennonite with us. said the prophetic

way is two-fold: to both face reality honestly, but also to envision and imagine a new way forward.

Let us, then, be like Habakkuk, not afraid to voice our anguish at injustice, but also steadfast in our faith that justice will prevail. May we recognize the "extinction bursts" for what they are – the desperate flailings of a dying past. And let us, with every fiber of our being, continue to bend that long arc of the moral universe, with love, with courage, and with unwavering faithfulness, towards the promised dawn of full inclusion and liberation for all - God's upside down Kingdom, fully and vibrantly realized.

Until that day, may we have faith that God's justice and peace is still to come.