



Rev. Shane Page
The Divine Accusation:
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
July 19, 2009

Having read this text all week, and now having heard it read aloud, I have to conclude that the passage we just heard – at least the first four verses – has to be one of the most sober beginnings of any book in all of Scripture. Notice how the prophet here, Habakkuk, begins his discourse by saying neither, “Praise be to God!” nor “God is good all the time!” but instead by raising his fist to God as though in protest as he shouts, “O Lord, how long shall I cry and you say not a word? How long shall injustice have its way and you do nothing about it?”

Instead of beginning his prayer with a word of affirmation, Habakkuk opens his mouth with an indictment, accusing God of negligence, of standing aloof from the ever-present scourge of oppression and injustice.

Habakkuk is one of those prophets with whom I doubt many of us have a lot of familiarity, one of those characters whose book I doubt we would be able to turn to without consulting our table of contents. Scholars like to refer to Habakkuk (and to others) as one of the “minor prophets,” meaning one of those prophets whose words are few, whose book is only a few chapters in length, and whom we would seldom consider to be a household name like those “major” prophets such as Isaiah or Jeremiah. But the more time I have spent with Habakkuk this week, the more I realize there is nothing minor about him.

As a matter of fact, if I accomplish nothing else in this sermon, I hope I will have at least commended him to you, because perhaps more than any other prophet, I think Habakkuk speaks to the heart of all of us, to all of us who have ever fallen on our knees in prayer and wondered if any good will come of it at all, wondering whether God even listens, and if he does listen, whether he even cares.

Judging from the tone of our lesson this morning, I think it fair to say Habakkuk is fed up. He is fed up watching people suffer so that others can enjoy a little solace. He is fed up with watching people eke out a living while those in authority insist all is well. He is fed up with people hearing God’s law and studying God’s law and extolling God’s law only to disregard it in practice as though it were a fairy tale. Habakkuk is fed up with violence, fed up with bad news, and, if we get down to it, he is fed up with God. “How long, O God, are you going watch this land of ours suffer and do nothing about it? How long will you watch us kill each other and do nothing to intervene?” How long, O Lord? How long? Who among us has never wanted to pray the same?

What a corrective is Habakkuk’s lament to our conventional ways of understanding a relationship with God. People like to “sell” the gospel, like to “sell” God as the cure to all our problems; that life with God is one long slow, romantic dance, making us feel as if all is right with the world. And then the moment comes when life with God feels anything but and we feel sold out, believing something on our part must be wrong.

Ellen Davis, an Old Testament scholar, once wrote this, and I think she hits the nail right on the head: That the “kind of prayer in which [you and I] need most fluency is the loud groan, and the Bible has bequeathed to us a lot of material on which to practice.” The kind of prayer, she said, in which you and I need the most fluency, the most practice, is the loud groan. None of us really knows how to groan, do we? We fear that if we express our deepest disappointments to

God, if we come clean with God and in some way call him to account, then we risk offending him. I have taught classes on the Psalms and have had the class read a lament psalm together, after which I have asked, “How many of you would feel comfortable praying to God in this way?” And we all agreed (including myself) how difficult it would be.

Yet none of the great figures of the Bible experienced any hesitation groaning to God. Moses groaned, Jeremiah groaned, Job groaned – three weeks ago I had to preach on the prophet Jonah who also groaned – and here Habakkuk groans. Think about Jesus: The one who, according to the letter to the Hebrews, when he prayed, he offered up prayers and supplications with tears and strong crying, whose last words on the cross were hardly “It’s all part of God’s plan!” but rather contained the question all of us have at one time or another: *My God, my God, why? Why?*

This is always a tough subject to talk about let alone to preach about, but let us be very clear: These laments, these groans, these questions, Habakkuk’s questions, our questions, are in no way a result of a lack of faith, of a faith on the verge of crumbling. They are, rather, the result of an *honest* faith, of a faith that pulls no punches and believes God is still God enough to listen.

What is faith anyway? Is it simply clinging to something despite all evidence to the contrary? Is it a refusal to look at the severity of our times, of any time, and say, “Oh well, it’s really all OK. It’ll be all right in the end”? I was in a conversation with someone just this week and we talked about faith, about church, about serving Jesus. We both more or less agreed that having faith, that exercising faith in God, is a great gift, a great joy, yes, but an honest faith, instead of giving you a spring in your step, brings you closer and closer to the brokenness of the world, makes you, over time, quite mindful of injustices. Things to which you once paid no attention suddenly get to you; you start losing sleep even; and your heart grieves because of them. You feel angry, depressed.

I went on a mission trip with a group of middle schoolers and their parents to Washington, DC last month, and it would be no stretch to say it was an exhausting six or seven days. We had conversations with the homeless, we fed the poor, and every night we reflected on the stories we heard – stories of families who work full time but yet visit a shelter every day because someone said, “This market is up! It’s time to raise the cost of rent!” There was more or less a hush among the group every evening because of what we heard and saw. Matt Watts, the youth leader, would ask all of us, “Tell me. Tell me tonight. What were the things you saw today that broke your heart, things that also break the heart of God?”

There is a tension in faith, no? Ever felt that tension before? You worship, you hear about the great promises of God, you sing the songs of Easter – resurrection! – and then you stroll around town or turn on the news and it, well, it just gets to you. Ever felt that tension before? In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Martin Luther King Jr. talked about what he called the *is-ness* and the *ought-ness*, that for the people of God there has to be a tension between what we see, things as they are, and what things ought to be. Faith in God puts you in this contradiction, tells you that what *is* is wrong and yet the rest of the world goes about as though none of it matters. It’s tough to be in that contradiction. It’ll make you bristle sometimes, break your heart. And yet I love what King says: “I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept that what is will always be, despite all appearances to the contrary.”

Faith in this God will do that to you: Put you in a contradiction, open your eyes to things you never cared about or never saw before, and yet somehow make you see beyond them.

Habakkuk was fed up, angry, heartbroken at what he saw, and then God helps him see beyond it. “Write the vision down,” God says, “for although this vision is for an appointed time, it will speak; it will surely come and will not tarry.” God gave Habakkuk a vision, a vision where God somehow, some way puts the world to rights.

It’s tough to see this vision. Someone once said that the Christian faith is really nothing more than a labor of vision. I love how he uses that word, “labor.” The Christian life: It’s a labor, a strenuous exercise in vision. And like anything laborious, that requires effort, we have to exercise constantly or otherwise the energy escapes us. We grow tired too quickly.

Speaking of the trip to DC, I recall it was our first night in the district and after dinner all of us went on what the leaders of our group called a Prayer Tour of the area. We would make a stop or drive past various sites in the city and the leader would ask a member of our group to pray for whatever it was we visited. *Would someone pray for the people in DuPont circle? Would someone offer a prayer for all the peoples represented by the League of Nations?* (I just have to mention the one prayer one of the kids prayed while we stopped in front of the U.S. Capitol. He said, “Um, Lord, help all these congressmen to make the right decisions, and, uh, bless the people who are hungry tonight, and, um, and help everyone pay their taxes on time. Amen.” Hilarious.

Anyway, at the end of the tour, our group leader said, “Now I want everyone to envision God embracing all the people of this city with love. I want everyone to imagine Washington, DC transformed into the city of God.” And I could hardly do it, too tired, too weak, too timid, so familiar with CNN’s vision of the world, so sold out to our ‘isness’ that I could hardly imagine the oughtness.

God, help us. Help us see. In spite of the facts, help us see Jesus, raised, resurrected, the new world order of God. Or at least help us see each other, to see this place, this church and all churches as a sign that you will never give up on us; that Jesus is on the move, working in and among us; and this table, help us see it, too.

It’s a vision, this table, God’s vision. Oh, we tend to see it as nothing more than some curious gesture where we receive a little bread, a little juice that makes the service a little longer than usual, when it is really a snapshot of God’s vision, of a time when rifles will be turned into gardening tools and we will feast together around the throne of God, forgiven and reconciled, witnesses of the healing of the nations.

Habakkuk cried, “How long?” We all cry in some way, “How long?”

And God’s answer for the time being is this: Take and eat.