

Habakkuk

At first glance, Habakkuk might seem like an unconventional book of the Bible to tap for the first Sunday of Advent. Its message of waiting with hope in the midst of despair offers a powerful word for both the Advent season and for the world we live in today.

Habakkuk's prophecies date to the dawn of the 6th century BCE, when Babylon was bearing down on Judah after defeating the Assyrian Empire to become the dominant regional power. Like many other biblical prophets, Habakkuk interprets Babylon's incursions as God's judgment on Judah's internal politics.

The book opens with a personal lament, a genre familiar from the psalms. The prophet's cry of frustration, "O Lord, how long?" is shared with over a dozen psalms, as well as other laments. This was a traumatic time in Israel's history. Not long before, the mighty Assyrian army destroyed one city after the other, brutally killing its people. And not long after Habakkuk was written, the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar would three times attack Jerusalem, taking its leaders and skilled citizens into exile, and in 587 BCE, destroying the city and the temple.

Violence was all around. Habakkuk's question testifies to prolonged suffering; he cannot imagine an end to the misery. Habakkuk does not hesitate to call God to account, giving voice to what he perceives is

God's refusal to respond to the prophet's cries for help. Despite Habakkuk's earnest call for the Divine Warrior, that is, God, what he really wants is not more violence but justice. Habakkuk has been a powerful force in the quest for justice.

Preachers have used Habakkuk to name, lament, and resist the forces of injustice and depravity. Biblical scholar Julian Classens tells the story of a church newspaper in Basel, Switzerland that spoke out against the Nazi regime in 1940 by quoting Habakkuk. Recognizing the power of the prophet's critique, Nazi censors banned the newspaper.

In South Africa's history, the book of Habakkuk served as an important source for resistance against the apartheid regime of the time. So, in the tumultuous 1980's, Allan Boesak, South African preacher, scholar, and activist, preached a sermon in London on Habakkuk imploring God: "Lord, how long must we wait before you help?" He quotes Calvin, who says: "Tyrants and their cruelty cannot endure without great weariness and sorrow, hence the world sounds forth these words, How long, How long?"

When anyone disturbs the whole world by his ambition and avarice, or everywhere commits, plunders or oppresses miserable nations; when he distresses the innocent, all cry out, "How long?" And this cry, proceeding as it does from the feeling of nature and the dictate of justice, is heard by the Lord.

Habakkuk is one of the most poignant and painful books in the Bible. Judah has evidently been faced first with corruption and then with invasion. And for each, the prophet goes to God in prayer, searching for help or explanations for the crimes. Habakkuk begins with words as contemporary and appalling as the daily newspapers. Death and destruction and horror control human history, but not God's history.

The issue is a question of theodicy. How can we justify the goodness of God and the powerfulness of God, with the presence of evil? The heart of the book consists of a prayer dialogue between Habakkuk and God, concerning the theological meaning behind the atrocities that have befallen his country, a problem that is universal, just as it was then, and continues today. Has there ever been a time in human history without atrocities and suffering of one sort or another?

We could easily envision someone from Ukraine today making the same cries, or any one of a number of other countries: Haiti, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Palestine, that are going through political or military ravages. For that matter anyone we know whose body is being ravaged by MS or MD or cancer or Leukemia or any grindingly debilitating terminal disease, can identify with the tears of Habakkuk when he saw the end coming and looked to God for an explanation. His pain (especially in the verses not covered by today's reading) is universal, physical, emotional, and one of "theodicies."

Within this context of violence, we hear Habakkuk's lament: "O Lord,

how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” In the midst of this nightmare, the only thing the prophet can do is to help his people voice their pain, to cry over the anguish they are experiencing. Echoing the Psalms of lament we hear the prophet cry out to God: “Lord, how long? Lord, help me!” Habakkuk’s lament joins laments from all around the world in which people have found the words to name the situation of violence and injustice in their lives, and resisting whatever is threatening their well-being and happiness.

It is significant to note that the violence and terror would continue for a long time, as evident in the ongoing description of violence that marks the rest of the book Habakkuk. But typical to the prophetic voice in the Old Testament, violence and injustice do not have the last word.

The important question is the reason for the cry to God. The answer is clear: violence! The Hebrew word is famous: *Chamas*. We know this word as the name for one party of the Palestinians, struggling with Israel for land and nationhood. For some of the members of that party, the word is to be taken quite literally; the struggle at times can be a violent one. So, given this modern use of the term, the same word in Hebrew and Arabic, we need to understand its ancient meaning to capture Habakkuk’s central concern. And of what does that *chamas* consist? Habakkuk makes it plain. “The Torah grows numb, and justice is never fulfilled. The wicked encircle the righteous, so justice comes out perverted.” Habakkuk is begging God to listen, to save, to do something about the destruction and violence that he constantly sees.

This is a cry that has been heard somewhere around the world at any given time in history and continues to this day; in the middle east, in Africa, in the Indian subcontinent, in Kosovo, in Ukraine. It is a cry heard and felt in every country and neighbourhood as hearts of those struggling with physical abuse, mental illness, poverty, homelessness, cry out in anguish: “God, when will you answer?”

Aaron Maurice Sari is the author of *The Many Deaths of Judas Iscariot: A Meditation on Suicide*. He wrote: “*When my brother died, I was an atheist. A profound encounter with God at the lowest point in my life led to my conversion and eventually to my being ordained. Sometimes God works in ways so shocking, so beyond our understanding, that we don’t know what to do. If we don’t allow ourselves to be shocked, we probably aren’t entering fully enough into the mystery.*”

God works in mysterious ways, in violent ways, in shocking ways. Does this qualify for a word of hope for today in the wake of this week’s news; shootings of patrons in a Colorado night club, shooting of Walmart employees in Virginia, and shooting of college students? It’s one thing to call a news event a wake-up call and quite another to know personally the beloved child of God whose life ended in sudden violence.

Because Habakkuk sees nothing but evil in Judah and Jerusalem, having made his complaint, he resolves to stand watch and wait, to see how God “will answer concerning my complaint.” Though YHWH has been silent up to now, Habakkuk is still convinced that YHWH will offer

a reply. After all, it is YHWH's business to respond to *chamas!* Habakkuk is rewarded for his persistence. God's answer does come. God tells Habakkuk to; "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the time. It speaks of an end; it does not lie. If it appears to delay, wait for it. It surely will come and not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them. The righteous will live in their faithfulness." God makes a critical promise to Habakkuk and his people. There is still a vision for the appointed time. There is still hope!

"*Appointed time*" refers to the right time, God's time, the time in which God's promise, the vision for God's people, God's Word, will come to pass. The people are told to wait for it; and in the meantime to be faithful. The vision is Habakkuk's certainty that no matter how dreadfully the Torah has been perverted by the evil King Jehoiakim, no matter how grossly the poor and the needy have been abused in a land far from God, no matter how monstrously the conquering Babylonians will treat the people and land of Israel, yet YHWH will not forget them. Habakkuk is instructed to write this conviction clearly - probably letters large enough that even a speedy runner will be able to rush by it and still read it!

Faithfulness to the Torah of YHWH and faithfulness to what the Torah demands in terms of justice and righteousness in the community of Israel will lead to abundant life in God. Those who are righteous live in and by their faithfulness to the Torah. God's deepest desire is for the

people of God to live in shalom with one another, in righteousness and justice and peace.

The term “*righteous*” is not first-and-foremost a moral term. Rather, a relational term. The righteous are those who have a relationship with God, are dependent on God (and thus, because they know they are dependent, they trust in God’s laws and follow them). The wicked, on the other hand, feel free to violate God’s laws and their neighbour’s needs, because they do not rely on God.

And is this not the life of faith, what faith is all about? To live in the “between” of complaint and struggle on the one hand, and God’s right time on the other? This is where we live as people of faith, active and alive in this world, struggling with injustice against perverted judgments and the slackening of God’s Law and waiting for God’s promised time, for the promise that God makes, that God has answered us, and will answer again; that God has saved us through Christ Jesus.

Now God’s answer is not what one would have liked to hear. We want God to fix our problems right away. But, God says, “Wait. Be patient. Deliverance is coming but you will have to wait.” This is the Advent theme we hear in the Advent hymn – Wait for the Lord, whose day is near, Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart!”

This divine response challenges all the easy answers or quick fixes that humans crave. In Israel’s history, Habakkuk’s message would be

followed by many more years of violence and injustice. Things would get much worse before they were to become better. However, amidst the most dire of circumstances, we see how the prophet clings to God's faithfulness and love.

Habakkuk reminds believers centuries later how important it is to keep on believing in a God that will bring deliverance. This unflinching belief in God's ability to make an end to violence is precisely the reason why the Book of Habakkuk was banned in Nazi Germany, the idea that God will end unjust power was considered far too dangerous to be tolerated.

God hears the cries of those who are suffering under the yoke of unjust regimes and will bring an end to violence. Good news for those who are being oppressed. Not so good news for those who are abusing their power.

However, the examples from Apartheid South Africa or the Nazi regime shows us that situations of violence can last many years and even decades. And in our personal lives, we may find ourselves in a situation of pain and suffering without end. Even the beautiful confession of faith with which Habakkuk ends acknowledges that the situation of violence and suffering will not end any time soon.

The book ends with a prayer, a song of thanksgiving in response to this vision. This song is a second picture of what the life of faith is like. The righteous, because they rely on God, do not rejoice only when the barns

are full, when the fields are teeming with livestock, and when the orchards blossom. Because the righteous rely on God, they trust and rejoice in God at all times.

“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation. God the Lord, is my strength.” And yet the wonderful thing about Habakkuk’s confession is that the believer can still say, I believe in a God that gives me strength. Amidst the violence. Amidst the depravity. And this conviction is what causes the believer to not only go on, but to tread upon the heights like a deer.

Through Habakkuk’s beautifully written dialogue with God we learn that the wicked carry within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. On the other hand, the believers contain the seeds of close relationship with God. This teaching is meant to be applied in a wider context than that of Judah and the invading armies. It speaks to all nations opposed to those through whom God is building the divine kingdom on earth. These ideas are carried into a messianic context in the New Testament letter to the Romans where “the one who is righteous will live by faith.”

In essence, the book of Habakkuk proclaims an Old Testament version of the theology of the cross. It says God is not found only or even primarily in the high points. Rather, our God meets us in our struggles

and suffering, in the low points of life. This book provides two pictures of the life of faith. In the first, the righteous live in the light of the promise they have received. God has promised a vision. In faith we believe that it will come. Yet, when we look around, we see a world in which all too often “the wicked surround the righteous.” But we trust that God’s vision is coming.

The second picture of the life of faith is that of a soul rejoicing in God’s blessings, even when the barns, branches, and pastures are empty. It is a picture of a heart that loves God, rather than merely the blessings God gives – of a heart that rejoices in God the giver, rather than merely in the gifts of God. It is a picture of one who knows life will inevitably bring low moments. And that these low moments are not signs that God has abandoned us. The righteous trust that God will find us in our suffering and will suffer with us.

Despite our struggles, despite our difficulties, through trust and faith in a loving God, and God’s promises, we will always find hope, and it is in our suffering that God comes to comfort and suffer with us. As our liturgical calendar turns to Advent, and we who mark our days and our worship accordingly, will be called to watch, to be alert, and to wait for the return of our Lord. We are instructed to keep awake and look for signs of the in-breaking of Christ’s reign and for the healing of our broken and suffering world. We are to be faithful in the midst of chaos or *Chamas*, injustice and the clamorous claims of empire. Habakkuk’s message to us on this first Sunday of Advent is: Trust in God and never lose hope!

We have an opportunity to speak the truth in love, to share the good news and our hope in Jesus Emmanuel who dwells among us and surely weeps at the injustices and cruelty we heap upon one another; at the loveless way we mistreat our neighbour: our Indigenous neighbour, our neighbour of colour, our neighbour immigrants, and our LGBTQIA+ neighbour. We have the chance to begin a conversation that might even lead to change. But this won't happen if we remain silent and try to get on with life as usual – because subjects of racism, injustice, privilege, violence, and prejudice are difficult and uncomfortable.

We are called to lament the pain and suffering our sisters and brothers are experiencing. We need to open our mouths, use our hands and voices and be a witness and a catalyst for change. And in the midst of it all, like Habakkuk, we **will** rejoice in the God who is our strength and who gives us swift feet to work for justice, for truth, for love and for peace – in our homes, our churches, our communities, our nation. This stubborn hope that Habakkuk proclaims and awaits is no mere Pollyanna response to the ills and angst of his age; it is instead the only response that leads to life, to wholeness, to justice, and to love. Habakkuk leaves us with a message and promise of hope. **Amen.**

PRAYERS of the People • First Sunday in Advent • Nov 27, 2022

(God of hope**Remember your people**)

Advent God, we enter this new church year worshipping together with song, an advent wreath and lessons. The very coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is near. Stir up in us a yearning heart, an open mind, a spirit seeking your Spirit to be our companion on our ongoing journey of faith. And when we celebrate the day of birth for Jesus, may He also be born anew in each of us.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come and you are coming. You have been here from the beginning, you have been here throughout all time, and now you come to us in this very hour. You remind us about yet another day, and another hour, another coming of which no one knows the moment, except the Father. You bid us to be ready.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

We bring before you, Holy Spirit, all the other spirits that would rob us of the joy of Jesus' coming. We fearfully invite you to help rid us of all the temporal and earthly concerns of this season, so that we may truly focus upon God incarnate, God in flesh, God for real, God with us now.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

Known to us, compassionate God, are persons with needs beyond our own ability to fix. We thank you for all who attend to the sick, the weary, and the ones who feel separated from you, the church, and even each other. Hear our prayers for those whom we name aloud who need a special measure of your grace. As you come to them and be their comforter and healer, hear us pray.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

In a world of rich resources, help us remember the poor, not only in memory, but also in love, for they are our brothers and sisters. Use our caring, giving, helping, and living with the poor as ways to be your incarnation. And may we see you incarnate in them.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

We yearn, holy God, for the day when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares. We yearn for the day of peace, when we can all walk in the gentle light of Christ. We look to your Son, who lived another way, taught a different lesson, emanated the Holy Spirit, and died a sacrificial death. He is the Messiah, and through Him we boldly pray.

God of hope ... **Remember your people.**

All the earth, seas, and heavens are yours, and we pray these prayers because you have promised to listen to us. **Amen.**