

- 1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.
- 2 Lord, how long will I call for help and you not listen?
I cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you don't deliver us.
- 3 Why do you show me injustice and look at anguish
so that devastation and violence are before me?
There is strife, and conflict abounds.
- 4 The Instruction is ineffective.
Justice does not endure
because the wicked surround the righteous.
Justice becomes warped.
- 5 Look among the nations and watch!
Be astonished and stare
because something is happening in your days
that you wouldn't believe even if told.
- 6 I am about to rouse the Chaldeans,
that bitter and impetuous nation,
which travels throughout the earth to possess dwelling places it does not own.
- 7 The Chaldean is dreadful and fearful.
He makes his own justice and dignity.

- 2 I will take my post;
I will position myself on the fortress.
I will keep watch to see what the Lord says to me
and how he will respond to my complaint.
- 2 Then the Lord answered me and said,
Write a vision, and make it plain upon a tablet
so that a runner can read it.
- 3 There is still a vision for the appointed time;
it testifies to the end;
it does not deceive.
If it delays, wait for it;
for it is surely coming; it will not be late.
- 4 Some people's desires are truly audacious;
they don't do the right thing.
But the righteous person will live honestly.

- 17 Though the fig tree doesn't bloom,
and there's no produce on the vine;
though the olive crop withers,
and the fields don't provide food;
though the sheep are cut off from the pen,
and there are no cattle in the stalls;
- 18 I will rejoice in the Lord.
I will rejoice in the God of my deliverance.
- 19 The Lord God is my strength.

He will set my feet like the deer.

He will let me walk upon the heights. **-Common English Bible**

For the past five years we've convened a creative worship planning team to identify a metaphor to ground our Advent worship. And every year I send out the scripture readings for the season in advance of our meeting. And every single year at least one person, often more than one person says, "What on earth does any of this have to do with Advent?" Part of the issue is that culturally we are in the season of Christmas— in some ways now from the beginning of November, but certainly after Thanksgiving, no? And Christmas is about joy and delight and the fulfillment of promise. But in church we are not in the Christmas season. We are in Advent. The season of waiting, preparing for a remembrance of Christ's first coming and for Christ's second coming in glory. Most of the classic Advent hymns, a few of which we sang a bit of today are in minor keys. It is a season for acknowledging the not yet character of life on earth, of tapping into longing, of leaning into hope, for reminding ourselves of God's promise.

The focal image your creative worship team chose is the professional photo on your screens and bulletins- prams and strollers lined up at a train station in Poland. This image reminds us of the war that yet rages in Ukraine, as it has for ten months. It reminds us of the displacement of people from situations of unfathomable violence. And it testifies to preparation in the midst of brokenness. Polish people lined up those prams knowing that mamas would be arriving with babes in arms and maybe bags on their backs. And they wanted to do something to lighten their load. The prams are yet empty. They stand ready to receive vulnerable life.

We read several excerpts from the minor prophet Habakkuk this morning and we witnessed an evolution in the prophet that, I think, is a rather powerful depiction of an Advent journey.

We don't know exactly when Habakkuk was prophesying, but it was at some moment near the end of Judah, the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. Last week we talked about the fact that violence had filled the land for decades, really centuries, when Assyria finally approached Jerusalem. I suggested that the reprieve that came thanks to the arrogant blasphemy of the field commander would only hold until Babylon arrived.

Well... when Habakkuk was prophet Babylon was either there or almost there. There are turns of phrases in Habakkuk that resonate today— it is a book that speaks in any moment of high violence, threat, and struggle.

Three mass shootings in the past 10 days. 662 mass shootings in our nation thus far this year. War in Ukraine. Is it speaking to you?

Habakkuk starts with the prophet hurling a complaint to God. “Where are you, God? I cry ‘Violence.’ And you don’t answer.” The prophet is distressed both by the unfaithfulness and violence of fellow Judeans all around him and by the threat of the Babylonians pressing in. He’s devastated that God’s Torah, God’s instruction to the people, appears totally ineffective because those who try to follow are surrounded by those who work against them, twisting and perverting justice. Nothing is as it should be. Nothing. And Habakkuk calls God to account for it. God’s first response isn’t exactly comforting. God suggests that God is rousing the Chaldeans, aka Babylonians, to come and destroy Judah. But before God reveals this God says

“Look among the nations and watch!

Be astonished and stare

because something is happening in your days

that you wouldn’t believe even if told.”

God calls the prophet to look and watch. What the prophet is asked to stay awake to, to watch is pretty awful— the destruction of his land and temple and people... but somehow God seems to be saying that even in this destruction God’s good purposes are being worked out. We wouldn’t believe it even if told on the basis of how bad things are; what we can see with our eyes is not all there is to see and understand.

We get this, no? It is hard, on many days, to perceive God’s good purposes being worked out. Things seem to be getting worse, not better. And in Habakkuk’s time so it was and so it had to be— definitely worse before better. Sometimes things have to be completely undone before the new can begin or arise. And the undoing can be tremendously painful.

The prophet responds to the call to look and watch by taking a post and watching more closely for God’s response. And while keeping watch he hears a call to “Write a vision and make it plain so that a runner can read it.” Either so that one running by can read it or so that a running messenger can read and deliver it. Something simple.

Something pithy. A word of God's promise in the midst of all the chaos and loss. God assures the prophet that though it seems all hope is lost there is still a vision for the appointed time, even if seems delayed, it won't be late. And the prophet's job is to write it down. Make it plain. Give people something they can see and understand to keep them going while they wait for the fullness of God's presence and promise.

I think the prams in Poland are rather like that vision written plain on a tablet. A clear sign of promise, of love, of care, of the possibility of community and a better future. I think the food you piled on the communion table last week and the pledge cards that filled the basket, the stockings that will be filled this week for residents of the Multnomah Safe Rest Village and all that is being gathered for neighbors in need in this season, all of this... is like a vision made plain so that those running in fear in our world can read it and know that there is hope.

By the end of Habakkuk, the Prophet is seeing clearly all that has been lost, the devastation of agriculture, the undoing of the economy, the loss of basic necessities and yet the prophet is rejoicing in the God of his deliverance. He is not yet delivered, but he is rejoicing. It is the rejoicing that one does in a minor key- the rejoicing of Advent. Rejoice, rejoice. When we have the courage to face all that is wrong and desperately in need of God's deliverance and to call on God to save us; when we find a way to offer a witness to hope even when the wrong seems oft so strong, we can find a way to rejoice even as we weep.

If we race to rejoicing, if we try to put on a mask of Christmas cheer too quickly, it may well feel shallow and insincere, or truthfully we may not feel much of anything at all. But if we have the courage to be present to all that we are feeling, we will first access hope and then we will tap into a deep well of joy. This is a journey we need in the real world in which we live. I hope you'll take it with me.

Work that influenced this sermon:

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 414: Wait for It Still" on their *BibleWorm Podcast*, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-414-wait-for-it-still-habakkuk-11-7-21-4-33b-6-17-19/>