



October 2, 2022 17th Sunday after Pentecost
“A Minor Prophet with a Major Message”
[Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4](#)

We have been steeped for weeks in the colorful and revealing parables of Luke, but today we are delving into the largely uncharted waters of Habakkuk.

Little is known about Habakkuk except that he was writing in the late 7th century BC. But we need to

hear from him, because the verse that launched the Reformation is hiding in plain sight in Chapter 2, verse 4 -- that the righteous live by their faith.

The book opens with a lament similar to that which many of us have voiced in times of trouble: “Lord, how long? How long must I cry to you for help, and you will not listen?” Habakkuk’s anguish was that his people were not living up to their vocation of being God’s people. Instead the growing number of the wicked were winning the day. They were conniving and outmaneuvering the righteous and thereby subverting God’s desire for justice.

What happens next in Chapter 1, which we don’t get in today’s reading, is that God gives Habakkuk an answer that absolutely floors him. God announces that he will punish the Judeans by sending their mortal enemy, the Babylonians to attack them. Habakkuk is flabbergasted. “Wait a minute, God, isn’t that even worse? Isn’t that even more unjust that the injustice you are supposed to be punishing?”

At the beginning of Chapter 2 the prophet takes his stance, an open challenge to God. “I am going to stand right here at my watchpost to see what God will say to THAT.”

What the comes from God is not an answer but the promise of an answer. God promises Habakkuk that a vision will be coming, and directs him in advance to write the message on tablets in letters large enough that even a runner could read them. The word must be spread. It’s as close to Twitter as they had in those days. But until that time that vision is given, God tells Habakkuk, “The righteous live by their faith.”

And what is the connection with the Reformation? Because this verse as it appears in 1 Corinthians 17--“By faith the righteous will live” – had been the main stumbling block for Luther in his career as a monk. Luther’s epiphany was to grasp that righteousness was not the product God’s relentless judgment, as he had thought – that only those who perfectly obey God’s laws and commandments are judged to be righteous, a standard Luther knew he could never live up to – but that righteousness is God’s perfect justice that comes freely to all believers through Christ on the cross. Simply by placing our faith in Christ, faith that as Jesus says is the size of a mustard seed, we are made righteous, or made right with God.

For Luther this revelation changed everything. He wrote, “Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the phrase ‘the justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

Seen through the lens of Habakkuk, this verse tells us that to live as God's righteous people means to live as those who have been promised a vision, but who have not yet received it. Do not give up. Keep faith. It may seem that the vision is slow to come, but trust that the vision will come.

Earlier this week before I learned of the scope of Hurricane Ian's devastation, I was going to talk about signs—what kind of signs can be read from a distance by a traveler passing by, what messages they might contain, and how these signs might be for us a vision of what God desires for us. But instead I want to focus on the way people mobilize to help one another in the midst or aftermath of a crisis, as signs of righteousness lived through faith.

You have all seen photos and doubtless read stories of self-sacrifice by responders, neighbors, or just random people who waded or swam through dangerous waters to those who were stranded—hundreds, maybe thousands, we don't know yet.

Whether or not any of these people considered themselves religious, their actions were signs of righteousness because what they did showed that they trusted in the promise of life that God gives us. They believed in the vision of health and wholeness that God desires for each of God's children, and they were acting in a way which demonstrated that trust. In many cases I'm sure that they were putting their own lives or well-being at risk to wade into chest-high waters or dive into the interior of submerged homes, but I'll wager that none of them gave their actions a second thought—they just plunged in, carrying with them into the dark waters the promise of life for all people.

We also see this same attitude of faith in those who are beginning the long cleanup process. Of course, you might say, cleaning up after a natural disaster is what people do. [IMAGE] But the very act of taking a broom and dustpan to a house whose interior has been reduced to rubble tells of extraordinary faith. Faith that if they begin the job and keep at it, somehow it will get done. Faith in that vision of new life that is out there somewhere, a vision so blurred at the moment they can't even begin to picture where and how it will crystallize. But the very act of starting to clean up means that this vision is drawing them forward somehow. As in Habakkuk, God has promised a vision, and they—and we—live in full faith that it *will* come.

Why does it take disasters such as these to bring out those deep qualities of righteousness that we know reside within every human soul? Division, bullying, the perversion of truth for selfish gain are nothing new to the humankind. One might even say they are endemic to the human condition. But it is our vocation, like the prophet, to stand at our watchpost, call out what we see, and to write God's vision for his people on tablets large enough that everyone can read it.

The fact is that in a state of crisis we become more fully who God created us to be. Just listen to God's vision as it's finally revealed in Habakkuk 3:

⁷Though 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,
¹⁸**yet I will rejoice in the LORD;** I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Just imagine what we could accomplish, God's people working together, if only we all embraced this vision!
Amen.