

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
October 2, 2016  
Pentecost 20  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Habakkuk 1:1-13, 2:1-4  
Psalm 37:1-18  
2 Timothy 1:1-14  
Luke 17:5-10

Our Old Testament lesson from Habakkuk begins by telling us that it is a “message the prophet received from the Lord in a vision.”

But it’s interesting, because the whole episode starts NOT with God speaking to Habakkuk, but with Habakkuk speaking to God. And Habakkuk’s tone as he speaks to God is far from *cordial*. This conversation is not polite “chit-chat” around the office watercooler. Habakkuk is angry. He is hurting. He is confused. The vision from the Lord starts *not* with God speaking to the prophet, but with the prophet speaking to God.

What he says to God wells up from the depths of his heart, and spills out into a two word question that has been asked before in other parts of the Old Testament. It is a question borne of anger, confusion, and frustration. We find it in the Psalms, we find it in Jeremiah, and we find it in Isaiah. And here it is on the lips of Habakkuk when he simply asks God: *How Long?*

How long, Lord, must I cry out for help only to have my cry fall on deaf ears?

Habakkuk is not the first person to ask this question. The Psalmists frequently did it, as is the case in Psalm 88: “I cry to you for help, O Lord; why O Lord do you reject me and hide your face from me?” (88:13)

Jeremiah asks it, when he says: “Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone, he has made my paths crooked” (Lam. 3:8)

This question, “How Long?” is a serious question. It implies that the person to whom you are asking it *has not been listening* and is not serious about doing what you ask.

A wife says to her husband: “Honey, *how long* are you going to let that faucet keep dripping?” “*How long* are you going to let that stuff pile up in the garage?”

But Habakkuk has the audacity to ask this question of God. He looks around, and he sees violence and bloodshed and destruction everywhere. Habakkuk has a long list of “societal ruptures,” and because God appears to be asleep at the switch, the ruptures continue and even worsen.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Well, Habakkuk inverts this question. *He holds God responsible*. If God is not engaged in the world, then the world implodes. And for Habakkuk, the

implosion is occurring in spades. Justice doesn't exist, and when it does it is crooked and bent out of shape. The law is malleable, he says, and the wicked surround the righteous and devour them. The language of justice has become doublespeak.

This is not just about “blowing off steam.” Habakkuk is angry. This is genuine *lament*. God's silence and inaction is inexcusable in covenant relationships. If God is not engaged, the world implodes. Period. And so the prophet owns his anger and his frustration, and he looks upward and shouts: *How Long?*

I have to be honest with you this morning. For my money, Habakkuk might as well be living in 2016, because his question is as contemporary as *right now*. Christians around the world are asking it. Perhaps some of you have asked it in recent days. I know I have. And if you haven't asked it, you've probably *thought it*.

Consider Christians right now in Aleppo and other parts of Syria. Consider Christians right now in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East. Violence, brutality, murder, martyrdom, much of it never reported or made known to the world. We can hear the cries rising up: *How long, O Lord, is this going to continue without your intervention?*

If we listen closely this morning, I believe we can hear this cry from Chicago and other cities in our nation: *How long, O Lord, will the culture of death continue to win the day in this nation and around the world?*

If we listen closely this morning, I believe we could hear the cries of those buried in mass graves outside of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Buchinwald, crying: *How long, O Lord, How long?*

If we listen closely this morning, we can hear the cries of those who are victims of corporate greed, where perpetrators are rewarded with golden parachutes rather than jail time. And they add their voices to Habakkuk's and they cry: *How long, O Lord, until justice is restored?*

Habakkuk raised the question long ago, but the conditions that caused him to raise it are as contemporary as right now. Some things, it seems, never change. And us moderns might be forgiven if we concluded that God seems just as deaf and uncaring *now* as he seemed to be in Habakkuk's day.

In the face of such circumstances, where are we to turn? What are we to think? If we dare ourselves to ask of God: *How Long?* Where are we to turn for the answer?

One possibility is to return to Habakkuk, and to see what he did and what he learned. He waited on God, and God came to him and answered him.

I wish it were not so, but God's answer to Habakkuk was a bit elusive and ambiguous. He tells Habakkuk to write it down. And the answer he gives to Habakkuk is simply this: WAIT. I am carrying out my designed plan, and you must wait patiently for it to play out.

In a really enigmatic phrase God tells Habakkuk: "Wait patiently, for it will surely take place, it will not be delayed."

This leads me to a question: *What do you do when you are waiting for something that seems to be taking forever to happen -- yet God says is not delayed?*

The only answer I know for that question is the one God gave to Habakkuk: You live by *faith*. The righteous, says God, will live by their faith.

Now in our culture, we tend to think of faith as mentally assenting to some truth or proposition. But this is such a truncated and incomplete understanding. The term "faith" here in Habakkuk 2:4 in the Hebrew is more accurately rendered "faithfulness." The word has to do with *obeying God's covenant*. It is not so much about assent, but about obedience and action.

This is probably why in the New Testament, the word "faith" is translated as "obedience" nearly half of the times it is used. Biblical faith is not merely mental assent to some truth. Biblical faith involves *acting on what you know*.

It's as if God says to Habakkuk: "While you're waiting patiently for me to intervene, you must continue to act and live your lives based on what you know of me. Continue – day by day – to trust and obey, even though you are prone to ask at times: *How Long?*"

If our Gospel lesson is any indication, we don't have to be heroic in our faith. We simply need to do the little things. We don't need *more* faith. We simply need grace to *act on the faith we already possess*.

As we come to the Lord's Table, we do so today having discovered that it is not a crime to ask of God: *How Long?* It's not because we do not love God, but precisely because we love Him so much, that at times our hearts cannot help but ask this question.

But as we ask it, let us also pray for the grace that helps us to wait patiently for God to bring all things into order. Let us pray for grace to pray the words of our Eucharistic prayer when it says: "In the fullness of time, put all things in subjection under your Christ." And let us pray for the grace to help us live by our faith that God is doing just that – even when we struggle to see it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.