

“A Place for Lamentation and a Place for Faithfulness”

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4; Luke 19:1–10

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I think it’s safe to assume that most of us do not spend a lot of time in the book of Habakkuk. He is, after all, one of the Minor Prophets. The designation does not mean they are less significant, it just means they are shorter — not the prophets themselves but the books. I have a friend who is an Old Testament professor, and he is “short in stature,” like Zaccheus in the reading from Luke, a wee little man. Don has said the Minor Prophets are short, like him, but he is kidding.

The Minor Prophets’ books are shorter, and the truth is this could make them more popular in this time when people have such limited attention spans. But we don’t know anything about this prophet or his context, other than what we can glean from the book, and the name, which may come from a verb that means “to embrace” or “to wrestle,” is odd. Habakkuk? We haven’t memorized many verses from this book.

But that is a shame because this is a text that speaks to our time. It reflects our frustration with the prevalence of evil and injustice as well as God’s delay in response. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen,” the prophet says, “Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous; therefore judgment comes forth perverted.”

Episcopal priest Mary Barnett says that not to hear Habakkuk’s words resonate with our current context is to be purposefully deaf (*The Christian Century*, November 2025, p. 25). But the good news is the text offers more than a lament with which we can identify. It points us toward a path we might follow to retain faith in a time like this.

On one level, we find here an encouragement to be honest with God about whatever we are thinking and feeling, to express even our

anger and frustration to God. The prophet does, like other prophets, Job, Moses, and many of the faithful of all times. God is not so small and insecure as to be threatened by criticism, no matter how inadequately informed. God can take whatever we have to say. And, as someone has noted, the very fact that we express these things to God means that we assume Someone is listening which, in and of itself, is an act of faith.

I have shared with some of you before this prayer of a rural southern preacher included in a biography of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Lord, send us rain. The ground is dry and hot and burns the bare feet walking over it. The tobacco leaves next to it are curling up. The cotton plants are wilting in the sun. The corn stalks are already stunted in their growth, the fodder leaves are withering, there won't be anything but nubbins, and Lord thou knowest I hate worse than hell to shuck nubbins. So, Lord, send us rain. Don't send us any flimsy dizzle drizzle. Send us a gully washer and a trash mover.
(*Harry Emerson Fosdick*, by Robert Moats Miller, p. 239)

Habakkuk encourages us to be this bold with whatever is on our hearts and minds. We might think of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" climbing up on a rooftop to have it out with God. That's OK, it is far better than pretending we aren't thinking what we are because God knows already.

But, of course, Habakkuk is not just sounding off to God in general; he is sounding off about evil and injustice and God's delay in response. So, there are deeper implications here. As we have noted, we can't be sure about the prophet's context, which leaves space for multiple interpretations, but the reference in Habakkuk 1:6 to the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, seems to point to God's judgment of the nation in allowing this foreign oppressor to take the people into exile.

The primary injustice is perpetrated by people who are supposed to be faithful to God, and then the Babylonians bring violence into play. "How could God allow all of this to happen?" the prophet wonders.

The faithful ask a similar question during the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel wrote about a death camp

inmate asking, “Where is God? Where is he?” when a youth hanged by the SS was still in agony after thirty minutes. Jesus asks a similar question from the cross about why God has forsaken him.

There have been numerous times throughout history when people of faith have felt compelled to ask where God is while evil and injustice prevail. From the perspective of some, this is such a time.

Many ordinary Palestinians and Israelis have to wonder where God is while political figures on both sides use them as pawns in their power games. Many suffering Ukrainians have had to wonder at times not just why they are not getting more international support as Putin’s Russia wages an unjust war, but why God has not intervened, assuming God is concerned with justice and cares about God’s people.

Those who live in contexts too numerous to name where poverty, natural disasters, and violence have caused untold suffering and forced people to become refugees have surely asked where God is, if God is... Even in this land of unparalleled prosperity and opportunity, power-hungry ideologues are using a distorted kind of faith to justify oppressive policies that deny hardworking people access to food, education, healthcare, and legal status, compelling us to wonder when God will intervene. We understand the prophet’s lament.

And yet, while there is value in the word of encouragement Habakkuk gives us to be honest about our feelings of frustration and questions about injustice, the prophet doesn’t just lament the condition of the world; he also goes to a high place, his watchpost on the rampart, where he can listen for God’s response to his complaint and perhaps see a vision of things to come. And indeed, God offers such a vision, saying things will be set right at an appointed time. So, Habakkuk and all the faithful should wait for it. It may seem to tarry, but it will surely come. In the meantime, the righteous live by their faithfulness.

This may not seem like much of an answer, but it is. Despite all evidence to the contrary, God is still sovereign, and so there is reason for hope. There is reason to believe in a day when goodness and justice will prevail. Thus, there is reason to continue living in the right way, no matter how much is going wrong all around us. The righteous live by

faithfulness, not just faith but faithfulness, not just right belief but faithful action. Yet how do we sustain faithfulness at a time like this?

Catholic spiritual writer Edward Hays told a story from the experience of the desert fathers and mothers which speaks to this question (*In Pursuit of the Great White Rabbit: Reflections on a Practical Spirituality*, pp. 10-11). A man goes to visit a wise hermit and finds him sitting outside his cave, enjoying the sun with his dog lazily lying beside him. The man asks, “Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?”

The old man responds, “One day my dog and I were sitting here quietly in the sun, as we are now. Suddenly, a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barked loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by his barking. What a sight it was, as the dogs ran barking across the creek, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit.”

Confused, the young man asks what the connection is between the rabbit chase and the quest for God. The hermit replies, “Why didn’t the other dogs continue the chase? They had not *seen* the rabbit.” They were attracted by the barking of the hermit’s dog. Once you have seen the rabbit, you will never give up the chase. That’s what kept the old monk in the desert. That’s what sustains us when it seems like evil and injustice are prevailing. Once we have seen God with the eyes of our souls, no matter how briefly, we will not give up faith, no matter what.

Yet, even when we have the motivation to remain faithful, how is our faithfulness expressed? Not just by believing in our hearts but by acting in the ways of kindness and compassion, righteousness and peace; responding to evil not with evil but with good; seeking justice and love. We may not be able to eliminate all evil and injustice, but we can live in ways that seek to bring more good and justice into the world. And all of us can do that. In God’s grace, all of us can do that.

We seek good through the clothing ministry and the food truck, Toy Joy and White Flag, Habitat for Humanity and Urban Ministries, Oak City Cares and A Place at the Table; by writing and speaking up for justice, advocating and protesting, speaking up for those who have no voice; and by treating people fairly and kindly in our everyday lives. And if we should ever think we are incapable of acting in a way that makes a difference, we need only consider the example of Zacchaeus.

He is a dreaded tax collector, one who takes advantage of local people on behalf of a foreign power and for his own benefit. He is part of the problem, not the solution, a perpetrator of injustice. But Jesus still sees him as a child of God, still sees good in him, and thus chooses to spend time with him. The crowd grumbles in protest, but Zacchaeus is overwhelmed with gratitude and thus says, “Half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

It is a genuine act of repentance to which Jesus responds with these words, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” But it is also an act of restorative justice for Zacchaeus and those he has wronged, as well as a reminder that repentance is also a part of faithfulness. One of the ways we live faithfully is by realizing when we have gotten caught up in the evil around us and changing our course appropriately. All of us have the potential to be part of the problem or part of the solution.

There is a place for lamentation, Habakkuk tells us, but there is also a place for faithfulness. It is a helpful word in this time and any time, from a little guy like Zacchaeus, a Minor Prophet but still a significant one. May God help us to hear it.