

Stand and Deliver

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Habakkuk 1:1-4 and 2:1-4

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Our scripture lesson comes from one of the minor prophets, Habakkuk, chapters 1 and 2. The whole book of Habakkuk is only three chapters and like the Book of Job, Habakkuk is a very distinct type of literature that offers us a first-person autobiographical dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk looks at the world around him as sees violence and destruction, rampant wrongdoing and trouble, and asks God why injustice prevails and God seems uninterested and saving or correcting all the glaring issues. The second half of our scripture reading is God's response to Habakkuk. Also, the very last verse of Habakkuk is famous in relation to the Protestant Reformation, because according to legend, a young struggling to be good Martin Luther, read those words, and realized faith was less a performance or carrot we chase, and more a gift that comes to us from outside of ourselves. So, hear the word of the Lord as it comes to us from the prophet Habakkuk, chapter 1, verse 1.

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? 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.

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

The great enemy of faith is not doubt, the great enemy of faith is not ignorance, the great enemy of faith is not disbelief, the great enemy of faith is certainty. So often we think faith should be ironclad certainty, a complete lack of questioning or 0% doubt, and unquestioning acceptance of progress or our given reality or the divine direction we should be going. Certainty. It kills curiosity. It believes living with any doubts is unacceptable. It places undue burdens on human beings, constraining them from asking

questions or posing questions to God or in times of anguish crying out in lamentation or even calling out, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Strange words of faith from the Son of God and certainly not ones that might best be characterized as 'certainty.' In Mark's gospel, Jesus heals a child with a severe physical debilitation and says to the father of the child, 'all things can be done for the one who believes.' The father replies: 'I believe; help my unbelief' (Mark 9:24), reminding us that even our daring acts of faith are entwined with our own doubts, anxieties, and unbelief. I believe, help my unbelief. Perhaps that is about the best we can do. Such honesty certainly characterizes what we find in scripture, from Sarah's laughter that she and over-the-hill Abraham would bear and bring God's blessing into the world, to Jacob who would wrestle with the divine presence all not on the banks of the Jabbok and be given the name, Israel, he or more aptly 'those who wrestle with God and prevail.' There is wrestling and questioning and struggling with God and what God expects of those who wrestle, question, and struggle with the divine presence in the world. And we have not even talked about Job or Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the exiles of Israel, who ask God point-blank, 'how do we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' Far from being defined as certainty, faith is something more visceral, more angst ridden, more passionate, more of a conversation seeking to engage with the divine presence. Certainty doesn't need faith. It just claims expertise and certitude. Faith pours its heart and soul into something and certainty just stands back and tries to coolly exhibit competence. Faith questions, faith seeks, faith cries out, faith wonders, faith hopes, faith works for justice, faith wrestles, faith is messy, but certainty does not need to do any of that. And as a result, certainty is neat, competent, and never questions. Certainty knows everything and exudes placid sureness.

Certainty would make no sense to the prophet Habakkuk. He addresses God in a time of crisis and concern for his people and what is happening around him and where exactly God is in the midst of invading armies and the kill or be killed world of the ancient near East. 'The wicked surround the righteous,' the prophet cries out, and yet where is God and why is God's salvation not visible? This is not a hypothetical being posed in a generic way to the reader, but this is a direct engagement by the prophet addressing the divine presence. Where are you God in the midst of this wrongdoing and injustice, and what are you going to do about it? The prophet declares what he will do until he gets a divine response. 'I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer...' Far from ignoring Habakkuk or chastising him for asking such questions or questioning his lack of certainty, the Lord listens and responds, saying that the vision will be bold for all to see and will come at the appropriate time. 'If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.' And so we are left with this scene, this scene of the prophet standing pat watching and waiting in the face of chaos and crises and the challenges of the time, taking his stand on the watch post, waiting to hear a word from the Lord and waiting for God's

vision to become a reality and waiting to see how exactly God will transform the tatters and uncertainty and destruction that seems to be all around him.

Often we read passages like this one from Habakkuk and wonder what to do with them, especially if we think faith means certainty. The world as he knew it was crumbling around Habakkuk and he wanted to know honestly where God was in the midst of the wrong and injustice he saw ascending to dominance. On behalf of a people watching one invading army after another overrun their kingdom, Habakkuk stations himself on the rampart and wants a word from the Lord to make sense of what is happening in the world. Where is God? Does God care? Does God make a difference in the midst of the socio-political topsy turvy of the ancient Near East or we resigned to take up the religion of our overlords? Habakkuk stations himself on the at his watchpost and refuses to stand down, step down, or retreat until he is able to discern a word from the Lord, until he is able to help his people see a future, until he is able to help move them forward in faith. He's not waiting for certainty, but just an answer from God that the chaos may dominate but cannot overwhelm, that life may experience turmoil and disappointment, that kingdoms may totter and shift, but the kingdom of God finds a way to take root in any soil, any clime, any situation, and to make a way where there is no way. The Assyrians and Babylonians may conquer, the stock market may plummet, Vladimir Putin may make nuclear threats, our community may face political challenges, life may feel uncertain, but fortunately faith is not certainty but instead this persistent will to stand on the rampart, to address God with our sorrows as well as our elation, to wait once again for a vision for brighter than we could have conjured up, and to look for the One who plants seeds in chaos, finds a way out of nothing, and gives us a vision of the future when all we see are flood waves and flood waters, when all we see are impasses and closed doors.

In a piece in *Journal for Preachers* a year ago, former Presbyterian minister and pastor-theologian John Rogers reminds us that 'to live by faith may not mean less pain or less distress; the way of faith is not a detour around adversity....sometimes we can do no more than cling to the faith of others'...sometimes the faith of our church, those who sit next to us in the pews, have 'to bear us along in our doubt and disability.'^[2] He recalls hearing from a parishioner that there are times or places when 'I just cannot say the creed.' He replied: 'I'll say it for you until you can say it again.' 'Whether or not you were aware of it, there have been times when you have had to say it for me; and I shall probably need you to do so again in the future,' too. That is how faith works, not certainty. And that is why standing in saying the creed together is not a laundry list of beliefs we are listing off or even a summary of what we need to belief, but standing and saying the creed together—the action itself—is an act of faith, kind of like Habakkuk getting up and standing on the rampart and engaging God and refusing to go anywhere until he's given a vision of God's future for him and his people. Sometimes faith is that act of week after week standing and saying what we believe, even when we may not have all the words,

relying on others to hold us up, to say what we believe alongside us, to say it for others when they cannot say it for themselves, but week after week, ascending to the rampart and standing on our watchpost and trusting that God will bring us a word of comfort, of clarity, of hope, a vision of the future and our role in it in due time.

Certainty does not have to do any of that. Certainty does not have to rely on others. Certainty does not have to stand in the face of chaos and uncertainty and try to make sense of the world with a word from the Lord. Certainty is a paper tiger, a fair-weather version of faith, that believes it should never struggle, never have dark nights of the soul, never have to ask for help, never have to stand on the faith of others, and never question God or question what is happening in the world. Certainty never takes risks or ascends to the ramparts, certainty has no nerve and doesn't look for God in the chaos.

Who knows what we will have to answer for or not answer for in this life, but I feel like if we have an opportunity like Habakkuk to engage God in the whirlwind, I wonder if God might say, not why didn't you live with more certainty, but why didn't you live with more nerve. Why didn't you know that faith is more about falling and failing and learning to get back up and stand and say what we believe all over again, trusting that God will find a way to give us a vision of his kingdom at an appropriate time and give us what we need to live out our role in it. I hope you never have certainty or at least think certainty is what we are supposed to have. I also hope you never lose your nerve, standing at your watch post, stationing yourselves on the rampart, like Habakkuk. Leaning on each other and trusting that God finds a way to give us what we need in our life together to reflect God's grace and to be Christ's hands and feet when we are not certain, when the world is not tranquil, and when life is not calm and serene. Like Habakkuk, may we stand firm, may we be unafraid to pose to God our questions and admit our struggles, and may we hold fast to the vision of God's kingdom in all the whirlwinds of our time.

^[2] John B. Rogers, Jr., *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2020), 6.

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