

November 27, 2022: THIS DAY'S SERMON

Readings: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, 17-19; Matthew 26:36-38

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Let us pray: *Faithful God, you proved your faithfulness to Your people when they cried out to you in distress. Be present in our distress, and show us how to be faithful to you in the midst of suffering. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

I echo the words of Associate Professor Cameron Howard this morning in reflecting that, at first glance, this morning's reading from Habakkuk seems like an unconventional book of the Bible to tap for the first Sunday in Advent. With that said, its message of waiting with hope in the midst of despair offers a powerful word for both the Advent season and for the world we live in today.

The message of Habakkuk has become known to the church primarily through a single phrase, "the just shall live by faith." These words lie at the heart of his message and provide a foundation upon which we, as a church, can build as we begin another journey together through our Advent Season.

Like last week's text from Isaiah, Habakkuk's central concern is that of calling attention to the miscarriage of justice in the political, judicial, and economic institutions of his people while also predicting the demise of that which is unjust in favor of God's ultimate establishment of a just and equitable society.

Habakkuk differs from other prophets, however, in that he gives prominent attention to an ongoing problem that challenges his prophetic confidence in God's justice: That of the perseverance of injustice in the world.

The prophet wrestles with the things of his world which appear to be continually at odds with his passion for justice and faith in God's just rule. This surely resonates with each of us this morning, especially in light of, dare I say it, two more mass shootings in our country in a span of days which took the lives of yet more innocent, unsuspecting people.

Habakkuk's words struck me this morning in that their form. While this is a cry of "How long, o Lord," the cry is made regarding what the prophet is witnessing as opposed to what he, himself, is experiencing.

Granted, we each have things we long for ... pray for ... cry out to God, "How long" for. We wait and we hope and we question the longed-for healing of the ones we love: our husbands, our children, our grieving friends ... our broken relationships. And cry out, hope, and pray we should.

The challenge Habakkuk calls to light this morning, though, is at the forefront of our own shared faith: Believing in the ultimate power of justice in a world that appears to be overwhelmingly unjust. This is one of the most difficult and human struggles we, as religious people, can face.

Habakkuk's words come in the form of a debate, with God, no less, as he dares to complain about the state of the world around him and question the justice of the divine plan itself. God rises to the challenge, answering with a command and a promise: Write the vision; make it plain so that the person delivering it may read it. There is **still** a vision – a dream – **wait for it! It will surely come.**

God, in his response to Habakkuk, goes on to further describe the "proud" as being without a right spirit. He contrasts them with the "righteous", who live by their faith.

But who are the righteous? Are they those who live perfectly, with religious piety? No. A righteous person is one who follows the path of God. And the path of God is one of justice and kindness and humility.

As people of God, we are called – we are commanded, in fact – to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. The justice we demand is not for ourselves. It is for those people of community who are marginalized and rejected and violently attacked – through both words and actions.

As deep as our cries "How long, O Lord" are, we can only imagine the depth of that cry within those communities, be it related to skin color, sexual preference or identity, gender, or religious expression, just to name a few.

Our greatest hope, perhaps, as well as challenge, is to share our faith in such a way that it helps them to believe that our God is their God, too. That the God of love we trust and cry out to loves them in the same, deep, and steadfast way. Because, without our God to cry out to, our life is not one of hope; it's one of despair.

It is through this one, shared and loving God that we are invited into a community that is not separated by division, but is **one**. We have been blessed to experience the unity that defies the constructs of our human division. We witnessed it in the baptism of little Lyyla last week, when her grandfather, a Deacon in the Catholic Church, stepped up to the pulpit to lead us in the profession of our faith.

We experienced it here on Wednesday evening, when some 50 people from five different faith traditions – Methodist, Jewish Renewal, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran – gathered to give thanks to God for the gifts which nourish and connect us as a community.

Like Jesus in this morning's Gospel reading, we **need** fellowship and companionship and community to get through the things of this life that threaten our peace, our faith, and our way of life.

When we talk about community, and the building of it, we also need to talk about what happens when it is either not present or the door is closed so tightly that some of those among us are kept out.

The tragedy of extreme violence in the shooting that occurred in Colorado Springs a week ago is a great example of the conversations we need to be having. Yes, we need to talk about appropriate gun control and, yes, we need to talk about mental illness; and we **must** also talk about creating loving, inclusive, and welcoming communities.

There is no way to justify the violence that continues to take the lives of so many in our country and around the world, for that matter. At the same time, it is critical that we consider the cultural environment that subjects so many to bullying and exclusion from community.

While there is absolutely no way – and I would not even dare – to justify the actions of the young man who walked into Club Q in Colorado Springs and began killing innocent people, my heart **cannot** not break for that young man.

He came from a home filled with domestic violence and addiction and was eventually left in the keeping of his grandmother. He was ridiculed and teased and bullied, both in his life and through social media, even to the point of having a cartoon website created to mock him. A young man who, by all accounts, was without a friend. How – and when will this end?

The beginning of the end is with the honesty of Jesus when he tells his friends that he is deeply grieved. It begins anew with Jesus' invitation to remain with him; to wait ... and to stay awake. This is the promised Jesus who is already and not yet. This is the Christ we await in this time of waiting and hoping and being while we hope in this time of Advent.

Bringing God's desired peace and justice into the world begins here, with us, among us, and with what we carry into the world. We are the bearers of Light, the purveyors of Peace, the presence of Love in the world.

May we go forward in life in hope, with the power and the promise of the words of Micah – words to live by – remembering that what the Lord demands of us is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen