

“How Long Must I Cry for Help?”

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2-1-5

I will tell you this is probably the first time that I have ever preached on Habakkuk. I'm not sure if I ever really knew where he was in our Bible before this Sunday. Sure, I knew he was in the Old Testament near the back, mixed in with all the other prophets. But Habakkuk is just not a prophet we usually think of when it comes to directing God's people toward justice. Usually for this task, we turn to Micah, Isaiah, or even Jeremiah. When it comes to God's justice, even Amos and Joel, Minor Prophets just like Habakkuk, get more time in the readings done in church than this guy. Habakkuk is just not one of the prophets that we as people of faith turn to when we want to talk about God's justice...which I am discovering is much to our own detriment.

Here's why I say this: In just a few lines, we find ourselves really relating to this prophet Habakkuk. Because like him, at some point along our own faith journeys, we have all found ourselves asking the same questions he is asking today. We have all found ourselves wondering Why God allows evil to happen. We have all found ourselves asking “When is God going to be true to God's promises and do something to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's

children.” Just like the prophet Habakkuk, we have found ourselves at some point or another along our faith journeys, wondering why God doesn’t do something to put a stop to all the evil in this world, put a stop to all the injustice that fills our world. Why isn’t God doing something now, right here, right now, to put a stop to all the hate and hurt that seem to be overtaking our world?

Everyday it feels like we are just waiting, poised like watchmen on a tower, waiting and wondering, looking off into the distance, looking for any sign that indicates God has heard our cries, looking for any sign that lets us know God will answer our questions. Just like Habakkuk, as people of faith nowadays, we find ourselves protesting, protesting what seems to be God’s inattention, protesting what seems to be God’s lack of care towards God’s creation.

We are frustrated with the ways of the world, ways that show us darkness is overtaking the light, ways that show us innocence is lost. We are frustrated with what seems to be God’s lack of attention to God’s children and we demand answers. We are protesting just like the prophet Habakkuk and we demand God explain God’s behavior.

Okay, I know that sounds like strong language. Who are we to demand anything from God? Well, that’s the beauty of our relationship with God. It is grounded in a long standing tradition where the people of God can come before

God, demanding answers. But, we need to realize this demanding is a two way street. God can and does demand a few things from us as well.

So for us to be able to understand a few things about this long standing prophetic tradition that allows both parties to demand things from each other, we need to take a closer look at this text. I want to give us a little background on Habakkuk's situation. We don't know much about this guy except that he is a prophet. We also don't know much about the date of his book except for one clue. The clue comes in the form of a name: the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans were part of the Babylonian Empire that reach its greatest power under King Nebuchadnezzar.

Okay, let me stop right there. Instead of boring everyone with crazy historical details, here is what we all need to know:

Habakkuk's country Judah was not doing really well. Things seemed to be falling apart both internally and externally. Internally, the courts were not necessarily working for the people. Money and greed fueled the way for justice. The other problem was that the church and all those good religious folks seemed to be remaining pretty quiet when it came to speaking up for the least of these. What Habakkuk was noticing was that poverty and injustice was running rampant in his country and the powers that be, you know all those leaders who are supposed to work together to make sure that society works, all those leaders didn't seem to

notice or care things were going horribly wrong very quickly. And to make matters worse, Judah was also about to be attacked by the Chaldeans, outsiders who would have probably treated Habakkuk and his fellow country people worse than the chosen powers that be ever would. As the old saying goes, sometimes it is better to deal with the devil you know than the devil you haven't met just yet. So that's the situation the prophet Habakkuk finds himself in along with his whole county. Judah is falling apart internally and externally.

So Habakkuk decides that he has had enough. He decides he is going to have a conversation with God. He wants to make sure God knows exactly how bad things were in Judah just in case God wasn't paying attention which brings us to our text today.

In this text, Habakkuk basically calls God out. He wants to know where God is in all this chaos. He wants to know why God is allowing evil and injustice to destroy everything. In our text today, Habakkuk is basically protesting what he perceives as God's lack of attention and lack of care towards the people of God.

Now, I'm sure we are all thinking...Why have we never heard of this prophet before? Right...His words fit our time so well. Habakkuk's protest is our protest today. Some of the same things he experienced, injustice, poverty, violence, are some of the same things we are experiencing as well in our world.

Just like Habakkuk, we find ourselves asking, “How long O God must we cry out to you for help” especially when we hear statistics that tell us every 47 seconds a child is abused or neglected.

How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help when we know that every 4 and half hours a child commits suicide?

How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help when we know every 67 seconds a baby is born in extreme poverty?

How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help?

The sad thing is that these statistics just tell us the picture of what is happening in the United States. The numbers become even more frightening when we begin to take a look at the situation of poverty globally.

How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help when your whole creation is falling apart, when children are dying of starvation in a world of plenty, when children are dying because of disease in a world where preventable medicine is available? How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help as we slowly destroy the children made in your image?

In the United States, every 47 seconds a child is abused or neglected. In the United States, every 67 seconds a child is born in extreme poverty. In the United States, every 4 and half hours a child commits suicide.

These numbers seem unreal for us. How can these things be happening here in one of the richest countries of the world? We don't like the answer to this question so we fool ourselves into thinking that such violence, poverty and injustice can't be happening here in the United States, let alone in KY or Woodford County.

Well, it is time for our wake up call. Here are some facts about KY. We are part of 10 states with the highest poverty rates for children under the age of 2. We are one of 2 states with the highest poverty rate for children of Caucasian descent. This doesn't even mention children of black, Hispanic or Asian descendant. If we add in all these children, KY moves higher on the list when it comes to the poverty rate among children.

Now, we may all be hoping I made all these numbers up just to prove a point. No, I'm not. These numbers about the child poverty rate in KY came from the Children's Defense Fund. But if you still doubt me, I am going to share with you an experience that I had this week. It is my hope that this experience will begin to open our eyes to the poverty and injustice that surrounds us each and every day right here in Woodford County.

On Wednesday, I skipped another meeting to attend a Bluegrass Community Action Community meeting. They were holding a Community Needs Assessment

Public Meeting and they had invited a number of community organizations to join in on this meeting. I decided to go because I thought it would be good for me to gain a better understanding of the experience of poverty in Woodford County, knowing that I have such a limited interaction with it. Let me tell you this was an eye opening experience for me. Here's why I say that.

The group gathered there that day, a group made up of several different community organizations that work day end and day out with many of our county residents who live in poverty, this particular group that was gathered there that day was challenged to name the top 3 poverty issues in Woodford County and they couldn't do it. Not because our county doesn't have any poverty issues. The group couldn't name the top 3 poverty issues because we couldn't agree on which issues took precedent over all the others. They could not narrow down the list to just three.

Let me give you an example: We were given a list that covered a broad base of topics, topics like transportation, employment, housing, education, health, nutrition, just to name a few. Well, we decided that the list was just too overwhelming for us to really have an accurate picture of the needs in our community so we decided to reduce the list to a more manageable number. The idea was to name the issues that we could eliminate because there was a program or something that covered that particular need. Easy right?

Someone started us off by suggesting that the group could eliminate transportation off our list. After all, for the most part, people have cars or if they don't have cars, the Senior Citizen's Center has buses. There are also a few buses connected with Community Action that provide transportation when needed. Seemed reasonable, but before I could even pick up my pen to mark off transportation from our list, another person from the local department of community based services said, "Not so fast. We definitely have a transportation problem in Woodford County. That's great that we have bus service but we don't have public transportation. The bus service that is offered is limited. It is either limited to senior citizens or designed for one time instances like going to the grocery store. It is almost impossible for an adult to find steady employment or go back to school in this county if he or she does not own a car which many of my clients do not because they can't afford them." Then someone else spoke up and said, "And while it is great that the Community Action Buses will take people to the grocery store, when you go, you can only get the amount of groceries that you can fit in your lap because of limited room on the bus which then leads to limited choices at the grocery store.

Then I decided to add to the transportation conversation by saying, "Well, here is another dimension to the transportation problem. You all are talking about Versailles. I have heard so many people say that they can't make it to the county

food pantry or the courthouse or any of the services offered because they live in Midway and there is not public transportation from Midway to Versailles. Sometimes people just can't find a ride to get connected to all the services available in Woodford County, services that could and would make a difference in their lives.

Well, needless to say, transportation stayed on the list along with employment, education, affordable housing, health and nutrition, and a lot more other stuff that wasn't even on the original list. And instead of the top 3 poverty issues that affect our community, we came up with a list of 10 and probably would have come up with a lot more if time would have allowed.

You see, the sad thing is that when people look around Woodford county, everyone assumes everyone is doing alright. Just look at Main Street. Just look at the big houses. Just look at the fancy horse farms. This is what people see when it comes to Woodford County.

But as someone said at that community meeting, "No one takes the time to look beyond that perfect picture to see who is working on those horse farms, to see who is struggling to find affordable housing, to see the family right here in our midst that is living in poverty, people with whom we work, people who are our neighbors, people for whom poverty isn't an issue. It is a way of life."

How long, O God, must we cry out to you for help?

“Fifty years ago, On the steps of the Capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama, after the conclusion of the Selma march, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized that the question, “How long?” remained in the hearts of the faithful but weary children, youths, women and men spanning race, religion, age, and geography who gathered there. Dr. King, near the end of his remarks, said:

“I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ Somebody’s asking, ‘How long will prejudice blind the visions of men?’ I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.....How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long, ‘cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord....His truth is marching on. ...Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him. Be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on. Glory, hallelujah. Glory, hallelujah. Glory, hallelujah. His truth is marching on.”

Just like Martin Luther King reminded the crowd that day in Selma, in Habakkuk, when injustice seemed to prevail, when poverty became too much, when the country was struggling both internally and externally, the prophet

perceived God's counsel and comfort. God told Habakkuk and is telling us again today: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. 3For 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."

When we hear these words from the prophet, words that speak of a time to come, words that tell us of a time to come when all hurt and hate will be no more, words that tells us of a time to come when no child will ever go hungry again, words that tells us of a time to come when no child will die due to the lack of affordable healthcare, when we hear these words from the prophet Habakkuk, we are reminded that God holds God's people primarily responsible for the creating of justice, for the care of the least of these, and for the work of eliminating poverty. For Habakkuk and for us as people of faith, there is no separation of state and church when it comes to caring for God's children. There is only the work of the Kingdom of God, the work of the peaceable Kingdom to which we are all called to do in our lives, the work of justice, the work of healing, and the work of reconciliation. This is God's answer to our protest and demands. God reminds us to remember the vision and to not lose hope. God reminds us to keep our eyes on the horizon, waiting for the coming of God's Kingdom while continuing to work in our communities creating justice, eliminating poverty, and caring for the least of these.

Now is the time for us to remember and realize that God has answered us. God answered Habakkuk's protest and God is answering our protest now. Hear these words from the prophet of Habakkuk and remember. Remember that when we get discouraged by all the injustice that fills our world and we ask how can God allow evil to happen in this world? Remember when we lose hope and wonder why God isn't doing something to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's children. Remember when we demand an answer from God that God has already answered us, then and now. And God's answer is the same today as it was then.

Take a few moments and listen... when we listen closely enough, when we open our hearts and minds to the grace, mercy and reconciling hope of God, we hear God speaking loud and clear. We hear God say to us time and time again, "I did do something about bringing healing and wholeness to all my children. I created you."

May we always work to bend the arc of healing and reconciliation towards God's vision of justice and love. Amen.