***HOW LONG?***

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Texts: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, 3:17-19 and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11-12

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? How long shall I cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?* The lament is the cry of the prophet Habakkuk on behalf of the suffering people of Israel, but it could as easily be the cry of residents of Aleppo caught in the battle between insurgents and the Syrian regime, or the cry of Iraqi families being used as human shields by ISIL soldiers as they flee the city of Mosul, or the cry of refugees fleeing persecution and war in their homeland only to find no nation willing to offer a safe haven to them. It could be the cry of Amish families in a Lancaster schoolhouse or students in Columbine and Virginia Tech or Christians at the Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston or victims at an Orlando night club or police officers in Dallas where mass shootings continue a legacy of gun violence in our nation. It could be the cries of supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement in the aftermath of so many shootings of young black males. It could be the cry of children in our country and community who endure abuse or neglect or worse.

Some days the news seems to go from bad to worse to worse yet, and the words of Habakkuk echo across the ages to speak for us:

*How long, O Lord, shall I cry for help and you will not listen?*

*Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?*

*Destruction and violence are before me;*

*strife and contention are on the rise. How long, O Lord!*

It has been 2600 years since Habakkuk’s lament, and it has been too long. There is still too much violence and war; too many diseases running rampant; too much corruption in and out of government; too much poverty and too much greed; too much intolerance; too much racism, sexism, terrorism, nationalism and hate-filled isms that demonize “the other”. There is too much suffering, too much pain, and too little evidence that God is reining it all in. The innocent die, the just lose to the unjust, terrorists strike, refugees suffer, our nation is polarized, and we are caught in the midst of it all. *How long, O Lord, shall we cry for help and you will not listen?*

Surely if God listened to our cries then it would all change for the better! That was the prevailing thought in Habakkuk’s day, and in our day too in some corners of the world. If God were listening, then God would act; and if God would act, then peace and prosperity, justice and harmony would be the order of things. The wolf would lie down with the lamb, the Republican with the Democrat, and there would be no more warring or weeping for God would wipe away every tear from every eye. God’s kingdom would come and God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, if only God were listening. But since that day has not come, as we know all too well, we are left to wonder if God is listening anymore and to wonder how long we are to wait for it all to end, if it ever will end.

Habakkuk was willing to wait and to watch and to listen for a word from the Lord, for he dared to believe that the Lord was still listening despite the sorry state of the world. Keeping watch was an act of faith. Waiting, however impatiently, was an act of faith. Habakkuk’s name means “to embrace”, and it is hope and faith that he embraces. Writing of Habakkuk, Martin Luther comments:

*The prophet comforts and encourages [the people] as one embraces a poor weeping child or other person, quieting and pacifying it with the assurance that, if God wills, conditions will mend.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

What a wonderful image! Habakkuk watched and waited and dared to hope because he trusted that God would reply, at some time in some way, God would answer him, for his God, our God, is ever-faithful.

Keeping watch and waiting is an act of faith for us too. We keep watch for God present in our midst and for the return of the Lord on that day and hour that no one knows except God. Christian hearts long for that day when Jesus returns to set things right; inquiring minds want to know when that day will come, for the promise of Christ’s return is the promise of a new reality that will end our time and initiate God’s time. For two thousand years those who follow Christ have been waiting patiently or not so patiently for his return, waiting for that appointed time when God’s Kingdom comes to earth in all its glory.

Waiting is not what we do best. Like young children a half hour into a long road trip, we are apt to ask with Habakkuk, “How long?” How long until the suffering is over? How long until cancer stops striking? How long until we are reunited with those we love who have left this earth to be with you? How long until the bombs stop exploding and the guns stop firing and the rhetoric is devoid of hate and there is real peace on earth? How long until you return, Lord? How long?

While there are those who ask that question and long for that day to come, there are also those who fear that day will come too soon and dread the return of Christ and the Day of Judgment. They cry out, not “How long, Lord?”, but “Take your time, Lord! I have yet to get around to those things I said I would do for you. I am not quite ready to be judged. Take your time, let me get my life in order, let me make a better pledge, let me make better use of my time. Perhaps you could offer a little advance warning before you come – not just a two minute warning as in football, maybe a two year warning!”

There are many Christians who no longer watch or wait at all anymore because they have given up on the coming of that day. They no longer believe the promise. After two thousand years of the saints waiting and watching in vain, the promise is too old to evoke excitement or fear in the 21st century. The Day of the Lord is out of sight and out of mind. It will come when it comes, if it comes at all. Habakkuk testifies that it will come and it is worth the wait. The word he received from the Lord was this:

*Write the vision; make it plain on tablets for all to see. 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.*

If it seems to tarry – and it does – then wait for it. Wait for it. It will surely come, not in a time of our choosing, but in a time of God’s choosing, and we know not when that will be. Pay no heed to the doomsday folks who predict the end times from the conflicts in the world today. Pay no heed to those who see hurricanes and earthquakes as sure and certain evidence of the Apocalypse to come. Pay no heed to the political pundits who claim that election of the other party’s nominee for president will be the end of life as we know it. Pay no heed to them, for Jesus tells us that no one knows the time – no one! Pay no heed, but do wait and watch and keep alert and listen with Habakkuk for a word from the Lord! Wait and watch and listen with faith and with faithfulness!

In colonial New England eclipses were unexplained phenomena. As the skies darkened during one such eclipse state legislators panicked and in fear of the end several moved to adjourn. But one legislator stood to declare:

*Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.*

Keeping watch is lighting candles and doing our duty, by candlelight if necessary, until that moment when the vision is fulfilled and the day of the Lord arrives. Our duty is to be faithful, to serve the Lord each and every day, to be found in the end doing what Christ calls us to do. “The righteous live by faith,” says the Lord. Across the centuries we have been blessed with a host of saints who have showed us what a faithful, righteous life looks like. It is marked by love of God and neighbor. It is marked by humility and grace. It is marked by the words of the prophet Micah: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. It is marked by hope! As John Calvin writes for us on this Reformation Sunday:

*We are taught here that we are not to deal with God in too limited a manner, but room must be given for hope; for the Lord does not immediately execute what he declares by his mouth; but his purpose is to prove patience and the obedience of faith.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Is that how you live – by faith and faithfulness and hope? If you knew the end was near would you do anything differently in your life today? If so, then don’t’ delay. Today is the day to make those changes, to live by faith, to follow the example of those saints, to live and love faithfully in hopeful anticipation of the coming of the kingdom. Jesus has set for us an example of that faithful life – life that reflects love for God and neighbors in all that we say and do. That is how we are to live and how we are to wait and watch – with faith, with faithfulness, with love, with hope!

Habakkuk’s opening words indict God for ignoring his plea for help in the midst of the world’s chaos, but the prophet ends with a beautiful affirmation of hope-filled faith:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation!*

Far from despairing of the difficulties of the world around him, Habakkuk finds hope in the promises of God; he finds reason to rejoice in the face of the chaos, for he knows that God saves. The name Jesus (*Jeshua*) means, the Lord saves. Habakkuk’s hope (and ours) lies in the faithfulness of the God who saves, hope in the mercy of God which is new every day, hope in the love of God which never ends. No matter what storms may come,

what wars may break out,

what diseases may afflict us,

what disasters may strike,

what president may be elected,

we need not fear, we need not despair, we need not surrender hope, for there is still a vision for the appointed time. It is a vision of peace, a vision of life, a vision of hope, a vision of the Kingdom of God. And if it seems to tarry, then wait for it,

with the cast of *Hamilton* “wait for it”,

with faith and faithfulness wait for it,

with hopeful expectation wait for it,

for it will surely come. It will surely come, says the Lord! Amen

1. “Lectures on Habakkuk 1526,” *in Luther’s Works*, Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 1974, 19:156 quoted by Bryan Spinks in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol.4, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.242 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Joh Calvin quoted by Bryan Spinks in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol.4, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.245 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)