

I

Last week, our family was among the millions of people who traveled for the Thanksgiving holiday. We were fortunate – all of our travel plans went smoothly, and there were no unexpected delays or detours. It was a much different experience than the first time Amy and I flew with our three children in tow, which, because of thunderstorms and crew delays, involved an unanticipated overnight stay on the floor of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

II

But all of us know that when we travel, be it by plane, train, or automobile, some amount of waiting is involved. We wait for the shuttle bus to take us from the parking lot to the terminal. We wait in line at the security checkpoint. We wait at the gate for our boarding group to be called. We wait for other passengers to clear the aisle and take their seats. We wait for the crew to finish preparing for departure. And the list goes on.

When we travel, we understand that sometimes there are unexpected delays and detours. But even if there are long waits involved, we trust that the appointed time will eventually come and we reach our intended destination.

III

But what if the wait goes far longer than we anticipated or imagined? Such is the case with our story from the prophet Habbakuk.

Today marks the first Sunday in the season of Advent, a season of anticipation and waiting for Christmas, which is right around the corner. We will get to the stories of Mary and Joseph and the manger and the shepherds and magi very soon. But we're not there yet.

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. We haven't gone chapter by chapter or even book by book, but we've been following the broad contours of the story of God as God took this one childless couple and fulfilled God's promise to them – that they would become the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation, a people who would eventually become known collectively as the Israelites.

When we come to our story today, it's still about 600 years before Joseph and Mary will travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Mary will give birth to a son and name him Jesus.

When we come to our story today, it seems like the promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah so long ago – that God would make them into a great nation, and that in and through them, God would bless all the families of the earth - has been all but forgotten. It seems like the promise that God made to David – that his descendant would rule over Israel forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end – was a cruel joke.

Because about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Babylonian Empire completely devastated Jerusalem. The Temple that King David conceived and King

Solomon had constructed was ripped down to its foundations by laughing, mocking Babylonian soldiers. And the Babylonian army took scores of Israelites into captivity, making them live as slaves in exile in Babylon.

And that event leads us to our reading from the prophet Habakkuk. Oftentimes we think of prophets as messengers who carry a word from God to the people – and that is certainly true. But sometimes a prophet’s job is also to carry a message from the people to God. And that leads us to the first part of our reading this morning. The prophet Habbakuk is standing among a devastated people, and he lifts his voice to God on behalf of the people.

So listen now for a Word from God from Habbakuk 1:1-4

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 judgement comes forth perverted.*

It’s striking to me that Habakkuk penned that prayer more than 2,500 years ago on the other side of the world, but it could have just as easily been written last week. There can be no doubt that we have seen

violence and wrongdoing and trouble in our land. We have seen strife and contention arise before us. It’s clear that there are many of our friends and neighbors in 2022 who believe that the law has become slack, who believe that justice never prevails, who believe that the wicked surround the righteous, who believe that judgment comes forth perverted.

These are troubled times in which we live.

But I know from spending time with many of you that Habakkuk’s prayer is much more personal. Some of you have been waiting so long for a desperate situation to get better, but it doesn’t look like it’s going to improve anytime soon. In fact, in some cases, it’s only getting worse.

Perhaps, my friend, you know the pain of a parent watching a son or daughter struggle and falter making the transition from child to young adult. You keep hoping and praying that things will get better, but there’s no sign of improvement.

Perhaps, my friend, you know what it is to have chronic pain in your body. Even a once simple task like walking across a room or stepping into the bathtub is excruciating and slow. You have been to every doctor and endured every test, and you keep hoping and praying that things will get better, but the doctors have told you not to count on any lasting relief.

Perhaps, my friend, you the pain of watching a loved one slip slowly into dementia. Perhaps you know all about strife and contention arising within your own

household, and this seems like a perversion of justice. Why, you ask, would God let someone's body outlive their mind?

Perhaps for you, my friend, even though Habakkuk penned his prayer more than 2,500 years ago half-a-world away, it could have just as easily been penned last night at your bedside.

Habakkuk looks at the devastation surrounding Jerusalem, and the looks at all the troubling years yet to come, and he prays, "O Lord, how long?"

But the good news in this text, the gospel news, is that the Lord does not remain silent. The Lord hears the cry of the prophet, and the Lord answers.

So listen now for a Word from God from Habbakuk, chapter 2, verses 2-4

*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.*

There is still a vision for the appointed time. Here we are, friends, gathered on the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming, and the season of Advent is a time that reminds us that Christmas is coming.

But Advent is also a season that reminds us that there is still a vision for the appointed time. There is still a vision for the appointed time when God will make all things new. A vision for the appointed time when wars will rage no more, when nation will no longer rise up against nation, when they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and they will learn the ways of war no more. A vision for the appointed time when death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more. A vision for the appointed time when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everlasting stream. A vision for the appointed time when racism and poverty and violence and enmity and strife will be no more. Advent is a season that reminds us that there is still a vision for the appointed time, and as the old spiritual says, soon and very soon, we are going to see the King.

But we're not there yet. We're still waiting.

And so did the prophet Habbakuk. God's people lived in exile in Babylon for generations. And it would still be several more centuries before good news of great joy would be proclaimed by some angels to some shepherds in fields outside of Bethlehem.

But the prophet waited with Advent hope. And while he waited, he prayed. So listen once again for a Word from God from Habbakuk, chapter 3, verses 17-19.

*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;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Yet I will rejoice. Yet I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Faced with utter destruction, faced with no hope of relief anytime soon, Habakkuk made up his mind that he was going to rejoice in the Lord anyway. He decided that he was going to write God's vision, and he was going to exult in God.

And I imagine that Habakkuk's friends mocked him, maybe even chided him. I imagine that they called him a Pollyanna or worse. But Habakkuk was no Pollyanna. Habakkuk knew well the pain and suffering that the people of God were undergoing. He was living it himself. Habakkuk is not a message of pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye.

Habakkuk is a message of a flickering light of hope in the midst of unimaginable darkness. Habakkuk is a message of stubborn, faithful resistance in the face of the domination systems in our world today. Habakkuk is an Advent message of Easter in the midst of a Good Friday world.

So for us, then, for we who live out our faith together in this thing we call the church, we who try to live by faith in the midst of a world gone mad, is to write God's vision. To

write it over and over and over again, until we know it by heart. To make it plain, so that anyone can read it, even if they're running at a dead sprint. In short, during this season of Advent, during this season of waiting, our job is to be Easter people in the midst of a Good Friday world.

Our rejoicing might not move the needle much in the short term.

But if we can rejoice in the Lord today, it means that the Babylonians haven't yet won. If we can rejoice in the Lord today, it means that the powers that be in the world today that tell us that the Church won't ever make a difference in the world are still wrong. If we can rejoice in the Lord today, it means that the vision of the appointed time when all manner of things will be well is still alive in this place. Remember, friends, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies.¹

And so we pray and we sing today. We sing and we pray, "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of Man appear."

And then we write the vision. We write it over and over and over again until we know it by heart. And then we pray, and we sing, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ One of my favorite lines from the film, *The Shawshank Redemption*.