

October 3, 2010  
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

### **Be Specific!**

It's not supposed to be like this. Maybe that's the prophet's first revelation. God had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and led them to the mountain where God displayed the divine glory and set this people apart, transformed, reformed as God's own righteous vision through which God intended to bless the world, bring peace, mercy, justice, healing and love to the nations of the earth. And now look...

Violence all around.

Oppression. Poverty. And an growing gap between rich and poor.

The shameful exploitation of foreigners trying to make a modest living.

Leaders too wrapped up in power struggles, positions of privilege and their own ambitions of empire.

The list of wrongs goes on and on, and the prophet knows: It's not supposed to be like this.

Usually, prophets go to the king and his court or to the rich and the powerful gathered in courtrooms or in the marketplace. There the prophets poetically, symbolically, methodically expose sin and corruption. They call for reform, for transformation – a national repentance, a turning around to bring forth justice and peace. Starting at the top, the prophets call kings and princes and all who surround them, occupying positions of privilege to turn around and live – not by their own efforts, skills or schemes – but by faith in this God who brought them out of death and into life.

Sadly in the end, wealth, power, greed, ambition and lust overcome God's vision for God's people. The prophet's words go unheeded, the prophet is ridiculed and dismissed and life in this world goes on in its sad, miserable way.

Habakkuk, though, is different.

Living in the wreckage of Israel's great reform movement, perhaps he's grown skeptical of people's power to change or to sustain reform, especially from the top down. So, Habakkuk goes straight to God and says, "It's not supposed to be like this!" Then he asks, "LORD, are you going to do something about it?"

Prophets, though, are a little crazy, and Habakkuk has a crazy kind of faith. You see, he actually believes God is alive and working and involved in this world. He believes that God listens to God's people, even now. What's more, the poor guy actually believes that God has the power and the will to change the world, its power structures, its cycles and systems ... everything. Even more, specifically, Habakkuk believes in and even trusts that the living, moving, surprising God who confounded the mega-rich, super-powerful pharaoh of Egypt in order to liberate his people – a lowly, powerless bunch of slaves – can and will act again in his life and the life of his nation.

So, Habakkuk goes to the temple and stands watch. He waits for a word from the LORD, a sign that God is on the move, doing something. He waits. He watches. He listens.

And the word comes to him in all its horror and wonder.

The Babylonians are coming. Maybe he hears the rumors, the stories of the new rising empire's terrible cruelty and fierce power. Maybe he senses the fear in the people anxiously crowding in and around the temple, waiting for answers. Maybe it comes over him like a shiver of horrid inevitability: This oppressive regime, with its confidence in its own power and intellect, its trust in its own power, plans, plots and schemes, its proud and petty tyrants making a fortune rich by extracting more and more from poor while turning the widow, the orphan and the alien out to fend for themselves. This is the end.

Kings rise and fall. Nations come and go. Empires expand, thrive and crumble. Fortunes are won and lost. The proud, privileged and powerful are gobbled up by people more proud and more powerful.

So the Word floods over him and fills him with dread: "Don't worry, Habakkuk" -- poor, crazy prophet -- "the violent, proud and ruthless, will be crushed with violence, pride and ruthlessness."

The story-line that dominates our lives is told as news and information, and it is the story of the rich and powerful, the beautiful and the privileged. We talk of politics, economics and law, but these talks are stories that shape our life and understanding of the world. In this story, if we wait long enough, there'll be justice. We will find justice in all its horror. It is cruel and violent and merciless and loveless, but it's there, nonetheless. Sooner or later the violent meet with violence. The proud overextend. Beauty fades. The famous are forgotten. The rich ... well, they can't take it with them. Justice, sweet merciless justice.

But wait, that's not the vision either. It's not supposed to be like that, either. That's not the vision of God leading God's poor people out slavery and into freedom, out of death and into life, out of despair and into faith, hope and a relationship of love. Where's that kingdom? Where's that God?

One afternoon a sterile old man was out with his flocks on the edges of one the world's first and greatest empires when the Word of the Living God came to him and told him: go to the place I'll show you and I will bless you with children and land and more than that I will transform the world through you and your children. And the sterile old man went. God started something. God did something.

Early one morning a loving mother and subversive slave oppressed by one of the world's greatest powers and civilizations took her son and put him in a basket and sent him down the river into the courts of the king. Something happened to him. God happened. God was doing something secretly, subversively.

One day, a shepherd (on the lamb for killing a soldier) was searching for strays when he spied a bush burning that wasn't really burning. He went over to investigate and The LORD told him to go to the king and tell him that God was taking his people back. It was the same boy that was put in the basket. The God that spoke to Abraham, had spoken again. God did something.

One evening a teenage girl met a messenger who told her that she would become the mother of the Christ. Her child would be God's son, and he would save God's people from their sins. "Teenage, unwed mother?" she says, "Sure, Lord, sounds like a plan."

One Friday at noon, that young woman's son, now a preacher, teacher and general troublemaker is crucified by order of the greatest empire the world has probably ever seen. He gives up his spirit in complete trust and faith in the God he calls Father. And early on the next Sunday morning, God raises him from the dead.

The righteous live by their faith.  
Empires, kingdoms and fortunes come and go.  
The righteous live by their faith.

Like Habakkuk, God's baptized people look at the world a little differently. Ours is a different story – not of power and wealth, human triumph and ability, but of God's active and redeeming love working out of weakness. We too, having been transformed by the living power of God's word of life that grabs us in baptism and joins us so physically and materially to the death and resurrection of Jesus, are raised to live with a simple trust that God actually is alive and working – healing the sick, raising the dead, counteracting the corrosive power of sin and death.

And not just in some general way – but specifically. We can dare be specific about what God has done in our collective past and what God promises to do in our shared future.

God has raised Jesus from the dead and promises to do the same for all who trust this God to set this world straight again. That's the story that shapes our life, even when all around seems, cruel, lost, barren and desolate. When the world of power and politics totters, crumbles and falls, God's people have learned to watch for the coming of God's kingdom in the most surprising and unlikely ways. We see God's power and God's love in the cross and open tomb.

From that violent conflict, God makes peace  
Out of that disease and death God bring healing and life.  
God guides us into righteousness and establishes a justice with mercy, ruled by love in the way of Jesus.

God surrounds us and connects us all in life-sustaining relationships that have no end, because God is living, loving.

People of Faith! Faith Family!

Oh we of little Faith? Can we have faith to trust that God is working still. Just the simple to trust that the God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in and with us and even now can make things happen, real things, specific things?

I think so. By the power of the Spirit, we know the story ...

That's why we can dare to be humble and to trust God to shape us into a servant community; why we can dare to live in partnership with Christians in Africa and all over the world; why we can risk to share our food with the hungry, our building with the homeless; why we can change our lifestyle to better tend to the earth; why we can boldly give away 5, 10, 20, 30, 50 percent of all we have. We know the story of God's love and purpose revealed in Jesus; we believe God can transform the world.

Even now, that little mustard seed creed of Faith – God can change things – is moving trees and mountains. And all of this ...

While empires rise and fall; while elections are won and lost; while agendas come and go, our real live God makes real things happen, quietly, beautifully, right here.

We know the story and its details. We can trust him.

It's not supposed to be like this, I know.

But wait, just a few minutes and we'll get a glimpse of what it's supposed to be like. In Jesus name. Amen.