
Ever Reforming

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 30, 2016 by
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“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?”

This call begins our readings this morning. Is this not a prayer that seems to resonate with so many in our world today?

“Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?” – the laments of myriad people speak to these same questions.

“Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” – And, think, this was written two thousand years ago, not just last week or last month!

“So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted.”

This reading from Habakkuk seems eerily placed in our lectionary cycle specifically to speak to the pain and perceptions of injustice in our world today. Or, perhaps this is the work of the Holy Spirit reminding us that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:9), and that the troubles of modern life that so consume us are a familiar litany to God.

Habakkuk is a book about living under injustice. The prophet laments in the face of suffering and rails against God’s seeming ambivalence. Then, when the Lord finally answers, the prophet is told to wait, and to wait faithfully, for justice will come in God’s time. The Lord promises that there is a future of deliverance that lies beyond the oppression; there is a future beyond the current reality. Until that new reality comes, however, the righteous are called to live by faith.

What does this “living by faith” mean? And, how is one supposed to live faithfully in the face of mighty suffering? This was a question that plagued Habakkuk thousands of years ago. It was also a question that plagued the professor, priest and pastor, Martin Luther, in the mid-sixteenth century.

Luther was an earnest Augustinian who desperately sought liberation from the feelings of unworthiness and sinfulness he felt in the eyes of God. As a young monk he traveled to Rome with expectations of being transformed by the holy city. Instead, what he encountered was corruption and decay. He saw justice perverted and God’s law made slack. Luther piously prayed and prostrated at all of the holy sites, yet his soul was not at peace. Legend has it that Luther had a revelation while climbing the Scala Santa, a sacred staircase associated with Christ’s passion and visited frequently by pilgrims. As he climbed the stairs on his knees doing penance for his sins and the sins of his family, words of scripture interrupted him and shocked him to his feet. Looking down the stairs onto the other penitents, he heard the phrase, “The just shall live by faith,” and in that moment the acts of repentance seemed to him to miss the mark. No longer did he strive to earn God’s mercy through his own merit and acts of contrition. Rather, the reality of God’s all- encompassing grace was opened up to him in a new way through this one little phrase.

Luther understood anew that the faithfulness of God to all humanity undergirds the lives of all people. This was revolutionary, for Luther knew that he, himself, was neither good nor righteous, but that Christ – in whom he was baptized - is. This became the turning point for his theology – one that turned him away from Rome and toward Christ’s saving grace.

Luther went on to write extensively about this revelation on righteousness. Rather than living in fear of God’s wrath for constantly falling short of pious expectations, Luther became glad in God’s liberating love. Reformation scholar, Heiko Oberman writes that “what was new about Luther’s discovery was that he saw God’s righteousness as inseparably united and merged with the righteousness of Christ: Already now it is received through faith. That is the reason all the faithful will be able to stand the test.”¹ The righteous live by faith not because they perform the most pious acts, but because they enjoy the promises of eternal life. They stand the tests of life because God joins them in their sufferings and endures all with them. The righteous live by faith. They endure through the faithful sustenance that God gives in Christ. And, this living lasts an eternity, not merely a human lifetime.

This insight gave Luther the courage and conviction to stand up to the injustices and violence he saw around him. It prompted him to lobby for reform, and it sparked a new way of understanding the relationship between God’s love and grace and our faithful response to it.

So, the righteous live by faith – the righteous are sustained by God’s faithfulness to them, and this is a liberating word. But what does the do practically for the Habakkuks of the world who are bowed down by injustice around them? What help is this for the Luthers of today who are excommunicated for their convictions? How does it heal the divide, welcome the immigrant, or comfort the mourner? How is it a blessing for those who are reviled, excluded and persecuted for the sake of the kingdom?

Karl Jacobson asks, “This is the life of faith, is it not? To live in the between of complaint and struggle on the one hand, and God’s right time on the other. This is where we live as people of faith, active and alive in this world, struggling with injustice against perverted judgments and the slackening of God’s Law, and waiting for God’s promised time, for the promise that God makes, that God has answered us, and will again; that God has saved us through Christ Jesus, and so we are saved.”² This is where we are foolish and fanciful – for to wait faithfully does not mean to wait idly. It means to wait with a charge and a purpose. To wait faithfully means to make something of the space between our now and “God’s appointed time”. It means inspiring others by sharing the good news of God’s promises. The Lord answers Habakkuk’s cries with a charge, “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.”

Waiting faithfully means writing the vision- and writing it so that all may see and be inspired by it. For Luther, that vision was written over many volumes and in sometimes colorful language. For Habakkuk that vision was written in a prayer of exultation in the Lord despite the agony of injustice. I wonder how we faithfully write this vision today. Do we write it through acts of lovingkindness toward our neighbors? Do we write it through

1 Heiko Oberman, *Luther*, p153.

2 Karl Jacobson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1875rg

advocacy for the oppressed? Do we write it through care for a sick relative or repair of a damaged relationship?

The picture on the cover of your bulletin is from a fall break trip I took a few weeks ago with students in my religious studies class called “Acts of Engagement”. In this class we look at the ways in which writing the vision of faithfulness is expressed in an ethic of service that emerges when we examine the lives of different social action leaders. Over the break the students and I went to Louisville, Kentucky to visit the Muhammad Ali Center and learn more about the ways Ali’s life spoke to this vision from a Muslim perspective. While in Louisville, we stayed in a Catholic Worker house and heard stories about how this vision is written in the radical hospitality inspired by Dorothy Day and shared with Latin American immigrants and asylum seekers who are new to this country – many of whom are women and children. We met Helen, a woman from El Salvador who left her family, friends and homeland to escape violence and brutality, and who found welcome and safety in this surprising community. This week we will visit the Duke archives and encounter the ways in which rabbi Marshall Meyer wrote this vision through the fight for human rights in Argentina. And, we will learn about Abraham Joshua Heschel and the ways in which he wrote this vision in the struggle for civil rights. The students are also being encouraged to write the vision, themselves, through work in the Durham community and service with their neighbors. This vision can be written in myriad languages, across many ages, and in a variety of fonts.

It is a vision that speaks of reformation – the reformation of our lives from agony to exultation, from oppression to liberation, and from isolation to beloved community. This is the kind of reformation that we may feel to be operating in God’s time rather than on our own schedules. We might live in a culture of instant gratification, but this kind of reformation takes time. In order to live by faith, we must also be open to understanding the ways in which our lives must be ever-reforming. Reformation is not a once-and-done sort of proposition; rather it is a constant necessity – a perpetual pull away from complacency and toward action. It is a willingness to name the injustices around us and work with God to right them. And we do this best when we do it together – when we do it with other like-minded and faith-guided people. With partners who, like us, live by faith that God imparts. With others who also ask, “How long, O Lord?” and who also strive for the kingdom.

I was reading an article in *The Christian Century* recently that outlined various examples of faith communities serving as catalysts for racial justice and reconciliation.³ In McKinney, Texas a network of clergy met with the mayor and police to pray together and work for reform after an incident in which police used excessive force on unarmed people of color. This town in Texas is being reformed by those who live by faith. Again, in Goshen, Indiana, police worked with local pastors to communicate more effectively about their desire to work proactively with the Hispanic community on immigration issues. These police and pastors in Indiana are being reformed through faith. In the midst of systemic violence and excessive force, and in the midst of distrust and discrimination, we are reminded that there is something more; something worth waiting for. We see the cooperation of religious and civic leaders who work together for education and community reform, and we get a glimpse of this promised life. We are called to do this work of reformation together, to do it visibly, and to do it faithfully every day.

³ “Local Transformations”, *Christian Century*, July 8, 2015, p. 7.

Tim Smith, bishop of the North Carolina Evangelical Lutheran Church in America puts it this way: “Reformation is something that each of us through our baptism into Christ is about daily — dying to sin and rising with Christ... We observe Reformation as an ongoing reminder that because Christ is alive and loose in the world, God in Christ is still creating, still evoking, still calling forth new life. (We are) always reforming; always being made new.”⁴ We are always being given new life in Christ, and we are always being called to share the life-giving promises of this faith with our neighbors — especially our neighbors who are marginalized, our neighbors who are suffering, and our neighbors who, like the prophet Habakkuk, are crying for salvation. And this, then, is the good news: that the righteous live by faith — a faith that compels us to work together for justice and peace. A faith that moves toward reconciliation, a faith that reforms, and a faith that leads to life-everlasting.

In his pain and agony at the violence around him, Habakkuk seeks peace. And God says that it will come, but not in the way or in the time that the prophet expects. It comes through an ever reforming faith — a faith that liberates us from the ways of war, a faith that waits in hope for a better way, a faith that is writ-large so that others running by may read it. A faith that is cruciform. A faith that encounters suffering and emerges glorified. A faith that comes from God and points to God. This is the faith that God gives; this is the faith that justifies us sinners; this is the faith that reconciles divides, overcomes death, reforms our lives and restores our souls.

May we, too, be ever-reformed by this faith, may we feel it written on our hearts, and may we, too, find in it life-everlasting.

Amen.