

INTO THIS WORLD - THE VISION MADE PLAIN

Advent

Habakkuk 1-3, selected verses

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Catherine Foote
University Congregational Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Habakkuk 1:1-3; 2:1-3; 3:17-19¹

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.

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what God will say to me
and what God will answer concerning my complaint.

Then God 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.

Though the fig tree does not blossom as 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 exalt in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord is my strength; who makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

Pastor Catherine Foote

Prayer:

May the words of my mouth
and meditations of our hearts
be met by grace in Your heart,
Oh God, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You probably heard about it. Not far from here -- maybe 4 miles that way at a Starbucks last week -- Dr. Robert Hughes and Dr. Yoshiko Harden had gotten together for a collegial cup of coffee. Dr. Harden had just been promoted into an administrative position at Central City College and Dr. Hughes, already an administrator at Seattle University, had invited her to lunch... to coffee, to share a cup of coffee and talk about their professional development. And as they were sitting there sharing a cup of coffee, suddenly Dr. Hughes felt something warm on his hand and Dr. Harden felt something warm on her face. She thought maybe someone had spilled a hot drink on her -- until she heard the words of a young man shouting racist, sexist words right after. And both of them say they were so

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989

stunned and surprised that at first they didn't even realize what was happening. But the young man continued to shout. "Do you know him?" Dr. Hughes asked Dr. Harden. "No," she said. And before anything else could be done, the man walked out of the coffee shop. He stood at the window a while and, although the folks inside could not hear what he was saying, they were certain he was repeating his hate. You heard about it didn't you? It happened here not 4 miles away in Seattle.

And I was not so much stunned at what happened -- although that was shocking -- as I was by the reaction of everybody else in that coffee shop. Only one person came forward, called to the manager to get the police, and went to the couple and said, "If you need a witness I'm here." *One person* in a crowded coffee shop. Even the police who arrived over an hour later said they were surprised that nobody intervened; only one person stepped up; nobody tried to stop the assault. I heard Dr. Hughes and Dr. Harden talk about this later in an interview on KUOW. Steve Radke was talking to them. And to his credit he honestly admitted, "If I had been in that coffee shop, I might not have done anything either. I might've been on my phone. I might've heard the shouting, figured it was a private fight, tried not to look up from my screen, and just kept working." And Dr. Harden answered, "Well, Bill, let me ask you: what kind of a community do you want to live in?"

You know we heard these readings from the book of Habakkuk. We're not even sure how to say the guy's name. But he was a prophet almost 400 years before Jesus... over 400 years before Jesus was born. He lived at a time when Israel had fallen to the Empire of the Assyrians. And Judah, where he was, was simply a vassal state. And he looked around at the misery he saw and he realized as the Assyrian evil empire was crumbling, it was crumbling at the hands of the Babylonians who would be even more ruthless. "How long, Oh Lord?" he cries out. He stands before God and says, "How long will we wait for justice?"

How long will we wait: It is the question of Advent, because Advent is a season of waiting. But let me tell you this, when I heard that interview on KUOW, I realized that this is not a season of "let's just wait and see what happens." It is *not* that kind of waiting. Because I put myself in that coffee shop, and I wondered, too, what I would do. And I realized I have not practiced standing up to that kind of hate. I don't know what to do. I don't know what I would have done, but I made a commitment right there that my kind of waiting will include practicing. I made a commitment to grab someone and just role-play it out. Practice and practice and get it wrong and get it wrong until I get it right. Try on the different places, the different stances, the different feelings, practice until I get it right.

Now I will tell you in my mind at least there are not often times when I tell this congregation exactly what to do, but I want to ask you this morning to practice standing up on the side of love. I want to ask you to find someone to work it out with, to stumble through it with, to try over and over again. Go ahead and get it wrong in that safe place. Amy tells us, you know, let's carry these signs that say "Black Lives Matter." Let's just practice, so when we have to go out there and it matters, we're ready. We are in a season of waiting, but it's not wait-and-see. Let's practice what it 27-means to stand up on the side of love, so that when it happens that something stuns us and shocks us and we are not sure what is happening, there will be something else in us, too: a practiced, strong response.

So, you may have heard about it. This also happened just a few days ago 5 miles that way in the city of Redmond. The sign in front of the Islamic Center the Muslim Association of Puget Sound (MAPS) was smashed by hate and vandalism. And you may have heard Mahmood Khadeer, the MAPS president, speak. Earlier in the week he had actually already sent a message to his congregation that said now is the time to channel all the negative energy into acts of service, into something big and positive. "I would like to personally challenge," he said, "each and every member of our community old and young, man and woman, to engage in some big way in doing something good." That was the call to our Islamic brothers and sisters at the largest Muslim community in Puget Sound. It was a call that went out *before* the smashing of their sign. They were ready. And in response to that smashing, he sent a follow-up note. "We will not let the hate of one overshadow the love of many. We will remain hopeful yet vigilant. We will not let hate intimidate us."

Sounds like he could have stood here, in a community promising to one another to meet hate with reconciling love. We say it every week. And here we are in a season of waiting for God to come into our world. But it's not wait and see. It's wait *and reach out*. Start making those connections *now*. We can do it. We can reach to the one we think of as other and make a connection that will matter in whatever might come.

You know because of this congregation and our open spirit, because of what you have taught me, I already have been to MAPS. I shared a Ramadan meal over there with some folks in this congregation, as well. Immediately I could reach out to a friend and say this congregation stands with you. Yes, we wait but we do not wait passively.

So I will ask you another thing. Will you work to make a connection -- most especially a connection that might make a difference now, because we need to hold tight to each other.

And finally let me say one Habakkuk asks, "How long?" God's answer is "Surely I am coming, and the good that I bring will not delay. It might seem long, but I am right here with you." This story we celebrate in this season is the story of God coming into our world: God right here with us, right? God right here with us.

So I ask one more thing of you. *Hold on to that vision*. God tells Habakkuk, "Make it plain. Write it on a tablet so clearly that a runner can still read while running to bring you the good news." We are a people today who need to hold on to the imagination God has given us of a world connected and held together. *We* need to write it, to make it so plain that anyone running by this place will know where we stand. While we are waiting it is *not* a time for silence. It is a time to speak up to make it plain, to make it so clear nobody can miss it.

We are a community that welcomes all. We are a community that does not discount anyone because of who they are or where they come from or what they believe. We are an open and affirming community who celebrates love wherever we find it faithfully lived out. That's who we are! That will not change. We make it plain in this time of waiting. We make it clear. We practice what one Orthodox professor has called the politics of empathy -- a spiritual practice. "Imagine yourself," he says, "in the body of someone labeled, other in the vulnerable body of the other." And Isn't that

incarnation? God and imagining God's way into each of our vulnerable bodies and refusing to abandon that space no matter what this angry world might throw at God. It is the story of this season placed right here in the darkest time of the year, as if nature itself is designed to remind us, *yes*, the days are getting shorter, *yes*, the night seems long. But the world itself is still turning toward the light.

So the prophet ends with these words, words of imagination, words of love and justice.

Though the fig tree does not blossom
 and no fruit is on the vine,
 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 God.
 I will exalt in my healing God, my strength
 The one who lifts me up, who gives me strength,
 who sets me on the hind's feet and on the heights.

Hold on to that imagination. Reach out to one another. And in any season of waiting that you find yourself, practice. Practice being kind. Practice reaching out. Practice. Practice overcoming hate with love. *That's* the kind of waiting I want to see in this place, so that anyone walking by knows who we are, *we* have made it plain.

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