

The Pain is Real

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

If you speak to anyone for any length of time, you will learn about their pain. Perhaps they have tragically lost a loved one or faced a serious health crisis or weathered financial strain. It is those moments when all is not going well that define us. The much beloved Anglican scholar C.S. Lewis aptly wrote: "We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is [God's] megaphone to rouse a deaf world." We tell the stories of our lives in terms of the hardships we have endured and the challenges we have surmounted. The inspirational posters have it right in claiming that failures and our response to failures matter more than our successes. Pain uniquely touches and defines each of us.

Habakkuk knows a thing or two about pain. From Habakkuk we see the power of giving voice to our pain and holding to our faith in the midst of our lament. This book of scripture reflects a traumatic time in Israel's history: the mighty Assyrian army had destroyed cities and killed their people. Soon after the book of Habakkuk was written, the Babylonians would attack Jerusalem three times, take the community leaders into exile, and then destroy the city and the temple. Violence abounded.

Habakkuk does not downplay the seriousness of his community's circumstances, nor does he submit to hopelessness. He responds with bold, informed dependence upon God. He does not pretend that he and his people are not hurting, that they are not worried that they will have enough to eat, and that they will survive--much less prosper--in the midst of such injustice and terror. He does not simply vent his frustration and get on with his day; he full-on laments. Crying for help, he waits for God to respond--and God does not, at least not right away. And when God does

answer, it is not the way we want. “Wait,” God says. “Trust that one day I will make all things well.”

According to Habakkuk, the “righteous” who “live by their faith” continue to follow the divine laws and rejoice in God’s love for them, even when there is little reason to rejoice. Faith involves a commitment to God and conviction that God ultimately is a provider and a giver, even when there are no gifts at the moment. The book ends with a vivid image of an unproductive fig tree:

“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.”

On the one hand, Habakkuk’s message is welcome and reassuring. This scripture, along with Job, Jonah, the Psalms, and some of our other bleaker texts, gives expression to the idea that life is hard in spite of God’s concern for us. Faith, as these texts demonstrate, does not require that we ignore or suppress our frustration with the incredibly difficult circumstances that come our way. God can take our questioning and anger.

On the other hand, this book proves unsatisfying, for while we can voice our complaints and deep, deep sadness, God does not take away our longings, at least not all at once and right away. Habakkuk’s message is: Cry out all you want, but faith requires that you have patience and trust. Keep waiting, keep trusting.

Lately especially tragedy seems to surround us. Our world has always been filled with strife--such, after all, is the story of human existence--but

whether we think about the division that exists in our own nation right now, or the Syrian refugee crisis, or even the sudden, quick string of illnesses and deaths in this very church, there is ample reason to lament and question why to have faith. We do not know why God does not intervene and stop such horrors or why miracles happen sometimes and not others.

Theological experts and amateurs alike have produced answers for millennia but none prove satisfactory. Even if God leaves human beings to their own devices and allows free will and sin to determine the course of events, we still have no explanation for why we face such terrible diseases and natural disasters. Does God choose not to step in or is God unable to intervene? Whatever the answer, we are left with a God who seems to come up short on love or short on power, and most of us do not care for either option. Pain and evil surpass our comprehension.

Most of our scriptures (Habakkuk included), and in fact, the practice of our faith, is not an argument for the existence of God. We all face doubts from time to time, and in some seasons, the doubts overshadow our faith. Doubt, many argue, is a part of faith. God expects our arguments and questions; these exchanges give our faith substance and depth. Why you choose to have faith cannot come from the church, the Bible, or a great spiritual teacher. These resources support us in our faith journey but ultimately faith proves utterly unreasonable and illogical. Faith is about choosing hope more often than despair, trust more often than cynicism, love more often than vengeance. Faith is easy until life gets hard.

Faith believes in spite of all the reasons not to.

While God does not promise to make the pain go away immediately, God does promise to meet us in the pain. God shows up through the hands we use to hold one another up, the whispers we hear from our loved ones who have left this earth urging us along, the small glimmers of joy we experience at the second when we think we can no longer bear our load.

Yes, our faith is a faith filled with pain--with crying and defeat and the cross--but it is a faith that knits us all together. We meet each other in our loss and we wait together for the resurrection.

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in

you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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 wrong-doing
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 judgment comes forth perverted.

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

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.