

February 3, 2002

“IF THE VISION TARRY...”

“If the vision tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”

Habakkuk 2:3

I used to have a professor friend at a prominent Theological Seminary who told people that Habakkuk was his favorite book of the Bible. It was a trifle tongue in cheek I know, but even then such a choice takes a lot of nerve. I would guess that not many attendees of the Chapel could find the book in the Old Testament, without sneaking a peak at the index. Less I guess, could spell it correctly, without being prompted by a Bible Dictionary. (I always have trouble myself.) It takes a lot to stand up and tell people that your favorite of all 66 books of the Holy Bible is a minor prophet named Habakkuk.

Strange choice. It would be like saying that Wassily Kandinsky is your favorite painter (a Russian artist who died in 1944); or that Edward the Confessor (1066) is your favorite British Monarch; or that Pietro Mascagni is your favorite composer, or even like saying that Bethesda-by-the-Sea is your favorite congregation on Palm Beach. (Don't tell Father Warren I added that.) (And please don't tell Father Lechiara that I belittled Edward the Confessor; his Parish church is named for Edward. All in jest. Honest.)

Nothing at all reliable is known about Habakkuk, except what we can deduce from the book, and that is very little. In Akkadian the word “Habakkuk” means a garden plant, a small fruit tree. He identifies himself twice, or more accurately is referred to twice, as “Habakkuk the Prophet”, an honorable enough title to our way of thinking, but in Biblical times it was not always so. That designation is used only three times in the entire Old Testament, with Haggai, Zechariah, and

Habakkuk. Amos even declares “I am no prophet nor the Son of a prophet. I am a farmer, a dresser of sycamore trees”, presumably a far more honorable occupation than wandering around prophesying.

The association of his name with an Akkadian plant could mean that Habakkuk was a convert, a foreigner like Ruth, or the child of a mixed marriage, or even an adopted son; no one knows for sure but there are little inklings for each of those possibilities. Professor Donald Gowan in his book, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* concludes however that he was most likely a “Professional prophet” quote end quote. It seems reasonable to assume that he was employed in the Jewish Temple, possibly as a Hassan, (a cantor), or a director of music. His job would have been to compose oracles and songs and Psalms of praise for the Worship Services, a kind of ancient Jack Jones or Malcolm Arnold. Chapter three of his book, while mostly unknown, is near enough one of the most beautiful and meaningful Psalms of the Old Testament. It is worth your time to read it.

It is normally called “The Prayer of Habakkuk.”

“O Lord, I have heard the report of thee,

and thy work.

In the midst of the years renew it;

In the midst of the years make it known;

In wrath remember mercy.

God came from Teman,

And the Holy One from Mount Paran.

His glory covered the heavens,

And the earth was full of his praise.

His brightness was like the light,

Rays flashed from his hand;

And there he veiled his power....

The sun and moon stood still in their habitation

At the light of thine arrows as they sped,

At the flash of thy glittering spear.....

Though the fig tree do not blossom,

Nor fruit be on the vines,

The produce of the olive fail

And the fields yield no food,

The flock be cut off from the fold

And there be no herd in the stalls,

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

Habakkuk 3

Not much specific and definitive is known either about when he pronounced his prophecy. The current text we use refers to the coming invasion of the Chaldeans, which would put him in Judah somewhere around 600 to 587 B.C. Other evidence seems to point to the time of the invasion of Alexander the Great, a noted plunderer of Jerusalem. If that is the case, it would mean that Habakkuk prophesied at approximately 300 or so B.C.

In 1947, in the now famous discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, one scroll titled “Ain Feshkha” offered us a new witness to the text. There was found an undated commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, or at least on the first two chapters. The dispute over the correct dating of the prophecy is however still unresolved. The Qumran Commentary was far more concerned with the religious meaning of Habakkuk than with the technicalities of its writing. But it is worth the time it takes to read the commentary.

Whatever, if you are still listening, there is one further Biblical comment on Habakkuk, or at least in the Apocryphal book of *Bel And The Dragon*. The fourteen Apocryphal Books are in the Roman Catholic Bible, but not usually in most Protestant ones. There we find a story about Daniel, the one in the lions’ den, and how Habakkuk helped him in his troubles. “Bel and the Dragon” takes place in the captivity of Babylon. It tells of the King’s attempt to get Daniel to bow down to Bel, the false God, a huge idol with his own temple. Daniel refused and subsequently was put into prison.

The argument which ensued had to do with the huge statue of Bel and whether Bel actually ate the food offered to him by the King and his subjects. Daniel laughed: "He is made of Brass and Clay, Sir, he couldn't eat anything." The King objected. Then Daniel proposed a test. When the food was set before Bel on the Temple altar one evening, Daniel and his servants sifted ashes onto the temple floor leading to and from the altar. That night, when the Priests of Bel and their families sneaked in to take the food home, little did they realize that their footprints were recorded in the ashes.

The King was so outraged he removed the Priests, scattered their families and gave Bel and the Temple to Daniel, who destroyed the idol and the building. In turn Daniel also killed the sacred dragon. With that the town's people demanded Daniel. The by now fearful King gave him up. They threw him into the lions' den (which connects to the Biblical Book of Daniel).

In the den he stayed for six days, without food. Meanwhile Habakkuk, it says, was over in Judea. He had cooked up a good meal of pottage and bread, for himself and his workers in the fields. But an angel of the Lord came to him and told him that rather than take the meal to the farm hands, he should take it to Daniel in the lions' den in Babylon. Habakkuk objected that he did not know where Babylon was, let alone the lions' den. So "the angel took him by the crown on his head lifted him up by his hair, and flew him over to Babylon," where he plopped him down right at the edge of the den. Habakkuk shouted down to Daniel to take the food. Daniel thanked God, and ate. "The angel "then whisked Habakkuk back to Judea and his own farm, lifting him once more by the hair on his head."

The story, however interesting, is surely legendary; but it does seem to indicate that the author of Bel and the Dragon was aware that the prophet Habakkuk was in Jerusalem at the time Daniel was written, which would argue for the later date.

However, whatever confusion and indecision accompanies his name, timing, family history, or occupation, there can be no doubt whatever about his message to the people of Israel. The simple point of what he said is that there is a way to live triumphantly in the midst of an age of trouble, personal and/or National. We also need to hear his words.

I have already indicated that whenever Habakkuk wrote, it was a time of great concern and difficulty in Israel, a day of turmoil and terror and tragedy. It was also a double edged sword, not unlike what is happening in our time. Their nation was worried about the attack from foreign powers to be sure; but also Habakkuk complains they were beset with a corrupt and shaky moral situation in the country. They were worried about the dangers of a ruthless Chaldean attack and cruelty from afar; but Habakkuk was worried that the nation would collapse under the weight of its own self-made sinfulness. There was economic corruption, the poor were desolate, personal morality was a disgrace, the laws of the land were a joke. He lamented that the people did whatever they could get away with.

He was wondering what to do about it. He had obviously tried talking to the leaders. He had surely spent time and prayers talking to the Lord, but apparently without success. So, the book begins: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to thee 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before "me; strife and contention arise. So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, and justice goes forth perverted." As the Book opens abruptly, there is no hint of what has gone wrong. It is an attack directed against God: "Lord, you do not listen – you do not save – you make me see wrongs, and look on trouble, and you do nothing about it."

It might startle you to hear a prophet speak like that. Habakkuk does not soft-pedal his way in. He never took a Dale Carnegie course on “How To Win Friends And Influence People.” He does not open with prayers of adoration, flattering God. He does not wait around silently and patiently. No! He storms right into the heavenly chamber and makes his demand; he wants to know what’s going on. If you are used to tiptoeing into the presence of God with your head bowed and heart trembling and your lips pursed, it might shock you to see how Habakkuk pushes right by the angelic secretarial staff, shoves open the inner door, and shouts “Why did you make the world the way you did? I could have done a better job myself!”

Here you have a man of the caliber of Job, who also dared to question God’s government of the world. Habakkuk like Malachi, disputes with the Lord. Like Jeremiah, he complains that oppression and injustice have gone unpunished. Jeremiah said he was suffering while there was joy in the tents of the wicked. (Are you listening?) God assures Habakkuk that it will all be fine. The people will be punished for their sins.

God replies: “Lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own. Dread and terrible are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.’ They come for violence; terror of them goes before them. They gather captives like sand. They laugh at every fortress, for they heap up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the “wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”

God tells Habakkuk not to worry about it. “I know what I am doing. I will have the Chaldeans destroy the whole Jewish nation.” With that, Habakkuk rebelled further. God’s latest decision only made it worse.

Do you remember just after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that Rev. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson had a little broadcast chat that the terrorist attacks had been successful because it meant that God had removed his shield

of protection from America because of the multitude of its sins, which they went on to name? They later recanted and squirmed and said in effect that they didn't mean it. They finally were forced to admit that the terrorists were the culprits, not the Lord. Well when God said he would use the Chaldeans to punish his chosen people, Habakkuk objected.

The problem he was wrestling with was the problem of Justice. Habakkuk believed in the omnipotence of God. Now that might not sound like a problem to you, for you might not believe in the literal omnipotence of God. But if you believed that God is all-powerful, omnipotent and that he does not share his power with anyone; how then could anything be in his creation which is not the result of his will? Habakkuk's second problem was that he believed in Righteousness of God. God is concerned about fairness. He did not make the world, and then withdraw to the heavens or go on to other worlds. He loves his creation and his creatures, made in his image. He continues to be involved. He wants them to deal justly with each other.

His third problem was that he believed the Reality of Evil. Some teach that evil does not really exist. But the Bible knows it does. Evil is a reality. "It cannot be denied or wished away but must be dealt with in life, and eventually must be tackled on an intellectual level if what we say we believe is to make any sense at all." (Professor Gowan: *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk*, p. 33) So, you and I might be free to roam the edges of chaos, but not Habakkuk. He had to deal with what he believed. His parameters were already set by his theology.

There is a problem here, echoed in the Gospels. Jesus said "Ask whatever you wish in my name and it will be given unto you." That is a lovely promise. But some who ask, still die in pain from disease; some are still left widows or orphans; some still lose their jobs, some lose everything by storm or accident, some still have children who continue to disappoint, no matter how much love and how many prayers and gifts are offered. Some lose their pensions in

unaccountable misdoings by company leaders. What a pity! Some still lose touch with reality. And on and on it goes.

There is no easy answer. But it is acceptable to question God as to why things are as they are. But be careful, for God always gives the same answer. To Habakkuk, as with Job and Jeremiah and Malachi, God said in effect, "Hush, little man. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the world? Did you teach the birds how to fly and the horses how to run? Did you teach the wind to blow? Who are you to question me? Shall a fault finder contend with God?" (Job)

Then follows one of the most famous passages in prophecy. In chapter two, Habakkuk says: "I will take my stand upon the watch-tower, and look forth to see what God will say to me..." A watch tower was built to observe the vineyard, to spot danger coming. It was erected further out so the shepherd's watchmen who were stationed alone to observe the fields would be secure.

But in this case, it seems that Habakkuk decided to get up and away from it all, to rise above the toil and moil, out of the ordinary, to a quiet place above the rush and bustle of the city streets. That might mean to us that God's revelation will come only, or at least mainly, if we listen alone with confident expectation, expect to receive, and climb up, as it were, to look for it and wait for it. "I will look to see what He will say to me."

It could be that here is the nub of our own uncertainties. We keep on struggling and worrying and trying to figure it out. But, we do not climb up our own watch tower to see what God is saying. We do not listen for His voice. When Habakkuk finally listened, God said: "Whatever goes on in the world, the righteous shall live by their faith." That is all they really need. "If the vision tarry, wait for it, it will not delay, it will surely come."

Does the vision tarry in your life? With a lot of people it does. The vision tarries. Life can seem long and slow. It comes when the doctor tells you that you have a serious illness. Or, when someone you love is having a long and hard struggle. Many of you will immediately think of those who have suffered the loss of someone they loved too much to lose. "I was so lost and lonely when it happened, I wanted to die," a woman told me two years ago, "but thankfully, the fog is lifting now."

Whatever the delay, and here each of us will wander off into the corridors of our own private thoughts and memories and hopes and fears. But, wherever you go, Habakkuk will be there waiting for you. "If the vision should tarry, wait for it." That's his advice: "Climb a tower alone, get up above the noise, and wait patiently for The Lord."

You might want to say: "Wait a minute, Prophet. I was told you have more insight than anyone in the whole Bible. What do you mean, just wait and wait patiently? If life is long and slow, is that all you have to tell me? I would rather have something concrete I can live with, and change with, and hold on to. I know all about the need for patience."

Well, Habakkuk responds, "Yes, that is what I mean. I mean you have to go on." If life is not worth living, what else are you going to do with it? If it seems to disappoint you, you need to wait for it, it will surely come.

He doesn't say enough, but I think I know what he means. He means that you have to believe that God cares about you. If God made the world and everything in it, and if all that comes within it, falls within His loving care, then nothing else

can matter. If He did not make the world, and did not give you life, and did not make you in His own image, and did not put you on the earth for a purpose, then nothing matters anyway; and we might as well eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we will surely die.

Habakkuk wants you to wait, but to wait with power. Wait, because sometimes it takes generations for God to get around to what you ask for now. Be patient as you wait.

Adam Sloman has a beautiful book where he mentions that he had a dream where he went to heaven one day, and of all the rooms he saw, the most enchanting place there was a room called "Delayed Blessings." He asked St. Peter what it meant. St. Peter said: "There are the blessings which God had prepared, but which were never taken." If the vision tarry, if life seems long and slow, surrender. Say to the Lord God: "I cannot handle this alone. Lord, help me so that my life is not consumed in trying to fight it. Let me go with the flow, and You take care of the rest. Please teach me by Your power what I should do next."

And once you completely surrender, Habakkuk becomes a little more palatable. If the vision tarry and life caves in, what do you do about it? You wait. You wait with patience, you wait with determination, you wait with commitment, and you wait with surrender, you wait with faith!

Christ says that too. If the vision tarry, wait for it, it will surely come. That is what happened in the Incarnation, when Christ finally came down. God came to take control. He asks you and me to surrender, and to try and be like Him, for now and forever more. Amen.

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