

MESSAGE: “The Vision Made Plain”

Text: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 3:17-19

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to ignite anticipation and hope in the heart that watches for Messiah.

Introduction

One of our Westies, Salty by name, seems to feel emotions with great intensity. When he is excited and happy his bark sounds remarkably similar to that of a seal clamoring for fish. But when he is sad, he howls the most mournful wail of which a canine is capable. (example) My wife tells me that this happens every time I take two of the other pups out for their walk first. He sits at the window and practically sobs because he fears he has been forgotten. He never has been forgotten, mind you, but that does nothing to mitigate his fear.

Transition:

Our text for this morning begins with such a lament. Habakkuk, the prophet, cries out in despair that God ignores his persistent petitions for help. He knows the history of his people. He knows the story of God’s intervention at critical moments of consequence. But the knowledge does nothing to mitigate his fear that this time God has forgotten...

Read: Habakkuk 1:1-4.

Habakkuk likely lived in a period of great unrest for Judah. Following the death of King Josiah at the hands of Pharaoh Neco, Judah became a vassal of Egypt. Four years later, with the defeat of Egypt at Carchemesh, the Babylonians took control of Judah. Since Judah had been an ally of Babylon, the change was at first welcomed; but since their king held Egyptian sympathies, the Babylonians turned against Judah, treating her like a conquered enemy instead of a friend. Everywhere Habakkuk looked, there seemed to be violence in a vacuum of justice. “How long shall I cry for help, O God,” Habakkuk wails, “and you will not listen?”

The Bible contains many such laments: Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah, and one book, Lamentations, which is devoted to human complaint against excessive suffering and God’s allowance of it. The echoes of lament ricochet across the centuries into our own generation: famine and disaster, war and exile, revolution and counter-revolution, genocide and Holocaust, economic depression and ecological eclipse. Like Salty, we wail at God, “How could you forget us? Don’t you care? Will you not save? Can’t you see how fearful we are?”

Read Habakkuk 2:1-4.

Habakkuk stands at his watchpost, waiting for God to respond, waiting for God to intervene, watching for a sign, any sign, that God hears, that God cares, that God helps. I don't know about you, but watching and waiting are not my strong suit.

When I was young, my brothers and I were expected to help our Dad with the forestry business after-school and on Saturdays: cutting cordwood, clearing land for house-lots, taking down problem trees or cleaning up storm damage. One Saturday when I was 10 or 11, we did something a bit different. We poured concrete to form the basement floor for the Nottingham Congregational Church which my Dad had agreed to help build. We began the work early and by 10 am, the task was complete. My father and brothers left to clear trees from a house-lot in another town; I was left at the church to 'watch over the cement.'

Now, I don't know if you have ever spent a day watching cement, but I can tell you, "It isn't very exciting." In the first place, I was never told exactly what it was I was to watch for. I figured I was there to make sure it didn't crack, but even if it did, I had no way of getting a message to my Dad, so that seemed rather pointless. Eventually, I decided I was left there to watch over the cement so that no one would step in it.

For seven solid hours, I 'watched over the cement so that no one would step in it.' Since nobody would be coming on a Saturday, I prepared myself with for a quiet job. I positioned a chair at the edge of the concrete and deposited a stack of church comic books next to it. "May as well pass the time," I thought to myself.

All went well until mid-afternoon. The door to the basement burst open and startled me from my momentary siesta. Much to my dismay, there was the pastor with both feet partially impressed in the concrete. He was not happy—and, I later discovered, neither was my father. I had flunked 'Watching 101.'

"There is a vision for the appointed time," God tells Habakkuk, "If it seems to tarry, wait for it, watch for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." The promise is one Habakkuk is asked to embrace, to anticipate with expectation, to hold in his heart as a gift of hope. God has not forgotten, and God will step in with miracle when the time is right. God gives Habakkuk (and us, too) the key in verse 4, "The righteous live by their faith." Ahh, one might ask, but what is faith?

The writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 11 of his book, that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith says, "God will pull through. I don't know how, and I don't know when. I don't even know where or through whom, but I

trust that God will act.” By the end of his prophecy, Habakkuk’s faith, hope and trust shine through the text.

Read: Habakkuk 3: 17-19.

What are we to watch for this Advent? Like Habakkuk’s, our world, too, is hostile and fearful. What is the message God wants front and center as we wait in Advent for God’s light to come yet again ‘into this world?’ Is it a message of hope and possibility? Is it a message of peace? Is it a message of ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet?’

Six centuries after the time of Habakkuk, a man by the name of Quirinius ruled in behalf of Rome as governor of Syria, to which Judea had been added for reason of census. His was a frustrating term of office, for he had to oversee the movement of a mass of people in Judea as they registered for tax liability. He watched the turmoil of the Jews and braced for a political uprising. He watched Rome and made sure he followed procedures as close to the book as possible.

He paid honor to the emperor and governed accordingly. He watched his political career and plotted his historical legacy. He watched the current events of his generation, but the birth of a child in a small village under his authority was something he did not watch. Today, Quirinius is a footnote to the Christmas story. He watched for the kingdom of Rome, but missed the kingdom of God.

How do we escape the litany of names of those who watched for the significance of human life, yet failed to find it? How do we watch for the second coming of Christ without becoming paranoid about the troubles that might attend it? How do we keep the message of watch, wait, hope and trust in CAPITAL letters?

By living the kingdom of God now. By loving with abandon. By diving into peace, compassion, and integrity. By creating space in the heart for the Spirit of Christ to dwell. By making the vision plain for all to see: “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.” Amen. Come, Emmanuel, come!