



“The Long View”

Text: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:2-4, 3:17-19a

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

Sunday, December 2, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We have entered the season of Advent - those four Sundays plus weekdays that lead up to Christmas. It was created in the early church as a mirror to Lent, the season of preparation for Easter. Christmas and Easter were the two times in the church's life when the Sacrament of Baptism was celebrated and new believers were welcomed into the church. Advent and Lent were meant to be times of preparation for taking that profound step of committing one's life to Jesus Christ.

We can bemoan the loss of that preparatory focus, but that ship has sailed. We can grouse about the holiday decorations going up earlier and earlier, but that ship is right behind the first one. We can throw hissy-fits about Christmas music, the over-commercialization of the season, and all the rest, but - really - the only people who can do anything about it is us, and as long as we participate in the system the system will rule. So, let's save our energy.

But we can step up our discipleship game, a little, in Advent. There are Advent devotionals that you can use. Family-centered Advent moments focus us back on the meaning of the season. Works of kindness and compassion are especially appropriate during these Advent days. We can do that.

And we can listen to the prophets. The prophets cannot help but disturb us. That is their job. They speak to people in power - who have money and influence - and as much as we might like to deny it - that is us. Our power and privilege are profound and the prophets challenge us in ways we do not always appreciate.

Habakkuk is such a prophet. I've introduced him to you already. His world is a violent and reckless place. Habakkuk is overwhelmed by the injustice and violence that he sees. He is brokenhearted that God seems distant and removed. Like the ancient Psalmist, as Habakkuk cries out to God, we feel his sense of abandonment:

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
why so far from delivering me
and from my anguished roaring?
My God, I cry by day - You answer not;
by night, and have no respite.

Habakkuk's lament gives voice to all those - from long ago to the present moment - who cry out in anguish and frustration. He names the troubles of his time and he turns to God, not completely sure that God is there. "How long, O Lord, shall I cry out, and You not listen..." Have you ever been there?

But, then, the Lord speaks to the prophet. The message is not exactly what Habakkuk - or the rest of us - are excited to hear. "If the word - or the vision from God - seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." Even if an answer from God seems too long in arriving, wait for it.

You've heard the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer before. Two days after Hitler had seized control of Germany in 1935, Bonhoeffer went on the radio and delivered a sermon criticizing the new regime. "Leaders of office which set themselves up as gods mock God," was the conclusion of his sermon. The German people never heard it. The Reich had switched off Bonhoeffer's sermon in mid-transmission. Bonhoeffer was arrested eight years later and spent the rest of his life in a jail cell, until he was executed just ten days before the fall of the Third Reich, martyred at the age of thirty-nine.

This fact of life - Bonhoeffer's imprisonment - became a learning moment for him. As he wrote about Advent, he spoke at length about the need for Christians to wait. From Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent: one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other - things that are really of no consequence - the door is shut, and can only be opened *from the outside...*

Waiting - no matter how irritating or exasperating - no matter how infuriating or annoying - is part of what the Christian life - and the Advent season - is all about. Waiting for the word from God, waiting for the vision, waiting for the resolution - waiting for justice, waiting for war's ending, waiting for violence to cease - waiting for peace, waiting for reconciliation, waiting for that new sense of direction - the Christian life and the season of Advent is all about waiting. We, the children of the instant gratification culture, don't want to hear that message. But it is the message we need to hear.

The question then becomes, "what do we do while we wait?" What do we do while we're waiting on the word from God, for the vision, for what we need to move on? What do we do when we wonder if God is near, if God hears our cries and laments, if God cares? What do we do when the news is filled with reports of violence and abuse, of injustice and deceit, of greed and avarice? What are we supposed to do?

God's answer to Habakkuk was this: "...the righteous live by their faith." Evidently, the Apostle Paul was familiar with that statement, since he quoted it in his Letter to the Romans. It was when reading that epistle that Martin Luther began to understand that we are justified - put right - with God by our faith.

And, we should quickly point out that a perfectly good and acceptable translation of the Greek word for "faith" is "trust." "The righteous will live by their trust in God." Trusting that God is there, that God hears, that God cares - trusting that the word from God will come, that the vision will be made clear, that the resolution of the conflict is on the way - that is how we are to live as God's people. Trusting God to be at work to end oppression and bring forth justice, trusting God to lead the way to the ending of conflict and wars, trusting that God will change the human hearts that see the answer to too many questions as violence.

As God's people, sisters of brothers of Jesus Christ, we are calling to place our trust in God's unfailing love and God's certain plan that justice and peace will reign supreme. Even when we wonder, even

 "...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,"

we will not abandon our trust that God is, in fact, in control and that God's will *will be done*. The conditions that seem so opposed to God's way will not last. Where there is famine, there will be feasting. Where there is conflict, there will be calm. Where there is violence, there will be kindness. We trust in God to do what God has planned.

And we wait. We wait in expectation. We wait in anticipation. We wait in hope.

We will trust in God and we will keep that trust in God, even when it is supremely challenged. We will not abandon our trust and our hope. God's kingdom will come. God's will *will be* done.

It's the long view. It calls us to see beyond the realm of touch and sight. It asks us to maintain our trust and confidence in God's inerrant plan. It is knowing that

“the door is shut, and can only be opened *from the outside...*”

And it is being absolutely and unshakably convinced that God's hand is on the latch and is about to open the door.

The long view. God is still in control. And will be. For now and evermore. Amen.



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