

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
November 27, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 1-2: selected verses

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you 'Violence!'
and you will not save?

³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

⁴ So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgement comes forth perverted.

2 I will stand at my watch-post,
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.

² Then the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³ 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.

Sermon: Wait and Hope (Advent 1)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

That is a well-known quotation from Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities, which one of my colleagues, James Murray, read at a clergy retreat last week. As soon as he said the words, you could see the 20 ministers in the circle, just sigh deeply into them because they spoke to our hearts so deeply. It was written by Dickens to reflect the social and political reality in England and France in 1775. But as you hear those words – don't you think to yourself that Charles Dickens could just as easily been writing about our time?

Don't you wonder sometimes if this has been the worst of times? During COVID lockdowns, I missed my extended family, I worried about my mother confined to her apartment in Montreal for weeks at a time. I went through a diagnosis of cancer, surgery and treatment – all in a time when there were no support groups, no one allowed to accompany me at the hospital or on doctor's visits, everything was masked and disinfected, and it felt like being distanced was always more important than any emotional support. So in some ways, for me and for many others, it was the worst of times.

But has it also unexpectedly been, in some ways, the best of times? I am an over-the-top introvert, and I already live with up to four other people, so in general I cannot say that the pandemic lockdowns made me lonely. I found that there was time to take those long hikes that I love.

I found time to be creative with art and fabrics. We as a household found opportunities to do things together as a family that we had missed out on for years. I actually got to spend Christmas Eve with my kids! The only one complaining was the cat, who wondered what we were doing in her space all day. "Couldn't you go to work so I can sleep all day?"

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, the epoch of belief, the epoch of incredulity...

In the midst of the last few years, we have encountered some astonishing wisdom and faith. There were leaders, both spiritual and political, who held a guiding light for us when the days were darkest, there were those who risked being unpopular or losing votes because of the stand they took. Businesses and community groups, and even churches! that put their creativity to the test, so that they could offer menus and guitar lessons, sermons and sacraments over the internet! It was a necessary technological adaptation that would have been unthinkable just a few months earlier. Hidden wisdom

became visible when all of us had to prioritize and figure out what was most important to us, as well as what we needed to let go.

But then haven't we also seen more than our share of foolishness? Whether it's not listening to science, or proclaiming that one perspective is better than the diverse voices of the community around us. Whether it's the foolishness of spending too many hours on twitter or amazon or streaming dramas to till all hours of the night - until your view of the world is totally distorted, hasn't the pandemic made fools out of us all?

it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair

This morning we hear the words of the prophet Habakkuk, who was a prophet that lived around the same time as Jeremiah and first Isaiah and Micah, around the sixth century before Christ. This is a period of history that we see from a variety of perspectives in scripture, both prophetic voices and history writers. At that time Judea was a nation in crisis, so this time loomed large in the scripture's storytelling. The Assyrians were laying siege to Jerusalem, the king had lost all power and ability to lead, and the people of God were left to fend for themselves as best they could.

Many of the prophets tried to explain how this had come to pass, how the people of God had lost their way, and now they were paying the price. Many of them proclaimed that the Assyrian army was God's tool of punishment.

It really was the worst of times...

But then there is the prophecy of Habakkuk – a prophet we don't hear from very often in our lectionary of scripture readings. The words of this minor prophet are very different from what the other major prophets proclaimed.

His book starts with a lamentation: "How long O God will you close your ears to my cries for help? I see violence all around me, but you do not come to help. It seems to me that the wicked are winning and true justice is perverted, and you O God are nowhere to be seen." Not exactly a good news story is it? Habakkuk's question to God comes back to haunt us again and again: "Where are you God? "

Habakkuk didn't have the answers, but he asked really good questions. He allowed the people to name their lamentations and what felt like a broken covenant between God and the people. He allowed the people to grieve their crushed illusions.

Habakkuk painted a picture of himself standing on top of the tallest watchtower over the walls of Jerusalem, waiting for God's response. Then the prophet turned the page and he started talking about HOPE.

What was HOPE for Habakkuk? As I said he was unique among prophets. He wasn't waiting for an army to save him, or a god wielding lightening bolts to descend from

heaven. No, Habakkuk was waiting for God's prophetic word to help him make sense of the topsy-turvy world around him.

Finally, in Habakkuk's vision, God's word is revealed. It's still not an answer – but it is a sign of better things to come.

“Go and make it plain to my people” God says “There is a vision and an appointed time, where the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. Write the vision out as large as you can so everyone can read it. Rent out a billboard if you have to! Paint it on the side of one of those Amazon warehouses – those who have victory and wealth today will be astonished by God's equity and justice-making tomorrow.”

God's word came because Habakkuk had dared to ask the question “Where are you God?” He did not shy away from the hard questions and, in opening up to that deep lament, he found his way to healing and meaning.

Habakkuk believed that the people of God must keep seeking God's vision, and not dwell forever in the signs of the times declared by pundits and false prophets. “If God's answer seems to tarry, he said: wait for it; it will surely come to you.”

Habakkuk didn't tell the people of God that they were being punished, nor did the prophet claim that the Assyrian army were God's right hand of judgement. Instead he told them to wait – to wait and see what God will do – for them and for all creation.

This season that we begin today, this season of Advent, is like OUR prophet Habakkuk. We are still lamenting the events of the world around us, and asking the same question he asked 2600 years ago, “How long? Where is God in all this?”

How long until the pews are full? How long before I can go visit my friend in the hospital? How long before we feel safe sending our kids into classrooms? How long until we enjoy the freedoms that we used to take for granted?

God's answer to us is not simply Wait and see, but Wait and HOPE. The whole season of Advent reminds us not to rush into the celebration of Christmas, but to wait and to HOPE for God to do something completely new.

The celebration of Jesus' birth is the celebration of God at work in our midst today. Right now. In these best of/worst of, wise and foolish, hoping and despairing times. Advent reminds us not to put our faith and hope in the way things were before, but to discover what is beloved and valuable in the new way God has called us to live. To embrace new things we might actually love or appreciate about the new normal. To open our hearts and minds to the vision God has given to the people who were always outsiders or on the fringe.

What does it mean for us to write large our Advent message of a resilient hope, and to write it so large that the whole community around us cannot fail to see it?

It means that we ourselves learn from Habakkuk to speak of hope when others are motivated by fear, to proclaim grace when others blame and accuse, to declare these the best and worst of times, but all of it moving forward in God's vision of a new creation, woven through with compassion and joy. Thanks be to God.