

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

1 This is the message that the Lord revealed to the prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk Complains of Injustice

² O Lord, how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from violence? ³ Why do you make me see such trouble? How can you stand to look on such wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are all around me, and there is fighting and quarreling everywhere. ⁴ The law is weak and useless, and justice is never done. Evil people get the better of the righteous, and so justice is perverted.

The Lord's Answer to Habakkuk

2 I will climb my watchtower and wait to see what the Lord will tell me to say and what answer he will give to my complaint.

² The Lord gave me this answer: "Write down clearly on tablets what I reveal to you, so that it can be read at a glance. ³ Put it in writing, because it is not yet time for it to come true. But the time is coming quickly, and what I show you will come true. It may seem slow in coming, but wait for it; it will certainly take place, and it will not be delayed. ⁴ And this is the message: 'Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.'"

Psalm 119:137-144

¹³⁷ You are righteous, Lord,
and your laws are just.

¹³⁸ The rules that you have given
are completely fair and right.

¹³⁹ My anger burns in me like a fire,
because my enemies disregard your commands.

¹⁴⁰ How certain your promise is!
How I love it!

¹⁴¹ I am unimportant and despised,
but I do not neglect your teachings.

¹⁴² Your righteousness will last forever,
and your law is always true.

¹⁴³ I am filled with trouble and anxiety,
but your commandments bring me joy.

¹⁴⁴ Your instructions are always just;
give me understanding, and I shall live.

Luke 19:1-10

19 Jesus went on into Jericho and was passing through. ² There was a chief tax collector there named Zacchaeus, who was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was a little man and could not see Jesus because of the crowd.

⁴ So he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, "Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today."

⁶ Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed him with great joy. ⁷ All the people who saw it started grumbling, "This man has gone as a guest to the home of a sinner!"

⁸ Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Listen, sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Salvation has come to this house today, for this man, also, is a descendant of Abraham. ¹⁰ The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Sermon: Revenge or Restoration?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

O Lord, how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from violence? ³ Why do you make me see such trouble? How can you stand to look on such wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are all around me, and there

is fighting and quarreling everywhere. 4 The law is weak and useless, and justice is never done. Evil people get the better of the righteous, and so justice is perverted.

These are the words of Habakkuk, a prophet who is crying out for relief from the evil people that are persecuting his people. These are familiar words – this question ‘how long’ is repeated over and over again. How long must I call for help, how long will you hide your face from me, how long will you forget me, how long before you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

It’s a common theme, this idea of waiting for justice. It never seems to come in our time – it seems just out of reach. The powerful dominate the weak, the rich eat the poor, injustice always seems to be the order of the day. So God’s people cry out for deliverance – who among us hasn’t asked the question – God, if you are good then why did this terrible thing happen to me?

Why was my child born so ill? Why did my house burn down, leaving me with nothing? Why did my wife die so young? We confront God with the injustices of our lives and we ask why? How long will you continue to let the world go on like this? Is this a test of some kind?

Habakkuk prayed, and then determined to wait for God’s answer. He writes, ‘I will climb my watchtower and wait to see what the Lord will tell me to say and what answer he will give to my complaint.’

God did answer Habakkuk, and he said this ‘write this down, because this word is certainly true. It will take some time coming, but here’s what will happen. Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.’ That’s it. End of message. Simple and concise, with very little room to misunderstand or misinterpret. ‘Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.’

But there’s a caveat – a qualification. This judgement will take some time to execute. God isn’t clear to Habakkuk how long exactly, but long enough that Habakkuk better write this message down so he doesn’t forget it. And in fact, things were about to get much worse. Habakkuk was complaining about the oppression in Israel – the oppression of the rich unto the poor, the strong unto the weak. But he’s writing about his own people here; the rich Israelites were taking advantage of the little people – the very same thing Amos was preaching about a century earlier. This behaviour has been going on for some time. Little did Habakkuk know that within twenty years proud Israel would be conquered, the temple sacked, gold, silver and people taken away.

While Habakkuk was holding his scroll with the words of God promising that the evil will not survive but the righteous will live, evil came knocking and took his country away. Certainly, God’s judgement is taking some time.

And in fact, when we fast forward six centuries to the time of Jesus, we see that little has really changed. The Jews have come home from exile, but they are still oppressed – the Romans own their country, armed soldiers are commonly seen in the streets of Jerusalem.

As with any occupation, turncoats are needed to keep things running smoothly, and I talked last week about the tax collectors being collaborators with the Romans. These were Israelites who chose to take sides with the occupying forces for personal gain and safety – worse than the occupiers really, since they had abandoned their familial, tribal and national ties to work with the Godless Gentiles to suppress their own people. Surely the cry of ‘how long’ is still resounding in the ears of the Israelites.

How long must we wait for justice? Why won’t God act? Then a Messiah appeared – the anointed one, the son of God who taught with authority and spoke to storms. People began to get excited, they crowded around Jesus, following him around the countryside, hanging on his every word, watching the miracles. Perhaps this was the one who would set Israel free, the true King of Israel returning to Jerusalem in triumph.

And what does this saviour do as he passed through Jericho, the first city that God gave to the Israelites as they emerged from the desert? He picks the collaborator out of the crowd – that dirty taxman. Just look at him, up there in a tree – what grown man climbs a tree anyway? Why would Jesus pick him? Why do the evil ones always seem to win? They get money that they don't earn, titles that they can't live up to, wives they don't deserve, and now this one gets Jesus' attention, and more than that, Jesus promises him salvation.

Salvation? Should this man not be stoned instead? Of all the people there, Jesus seems to pick the most unworthy to raise up, and the people are left asking – how long, O Lord? How long will the worst people receive the best of everything? Life is not fair.

And they're right, these people. Life is not fair, and we're still waiting for God to fulfill his word to Habakkuk, that the evil will perish and the righteous shall live. When we look around the world we just don't see justice.

Protestors of the Dakota access pipeline are having dogs set on them, unarmed people are being shot by police, the very people who cause economic shockwaves are the ones who profit from them while the rest of us pay the price, mothers can't afford to feed their children, fathers can't protect their families, the weak are crushed by the strong, and we aren't seeing that promised justice yet. How long must we wait? What are we supposed to do?

I think one answer comes from another old testament prophet – Jonah. We remember Jonah, he was the one sent to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians, enemies of the people of God. He had a simple message to deliver – repent or die. After some rebellion, Jonah did deliver that message, and then found himself a good seat on a hill to watch the destruction of the city.

But he was disappointed. The Ninevites actually repented; they turned to God and God spared them and Jonah was furious. He felt cheated - robbed. The evil were supposed to perish, not receive life, and Jonah was so angry, he said, that he could die.

So angry that he did not see his enemies crushed that he could die. You see, Jonah needed to see death so badly, that even his own would do. Jonah might have used words like justice, but deep down what he really wanted was revenge. Retribution. To see his enemy's babies dashed upon the rocks.

We often get these words mixed up – justice and revenge. We think in terms of payback, punishment, and pain. Rarely do we use words like restoration or reconciliation. This is why when Jesus chose to have dinner with Zacchaeus and pronounces him as being a healed and restored son of Abraham the immediate reaction is to boo. We want to see the bad guys burn – we want them to suffer as they have caused others to suffer. We want them to suffer more, even.

We don't really want justice; we don't really want peace and harmony. The Germans have a word for this - schadenfreude, with is the pleasure we get from seeing someone else's misfortune, and it's even sweeter when we think they deserved it.

Deep down, we all have this potential bloodlust. We want to see wrongdoers punished, and the more severely the better. This feels like justice to us. But really, this is revenge, and retribution, and we are told in no uncertain terms to back off from this. There is another way – not an easy way, but it is God's way.

Revenge, retribution, payback, punishment – these are all violent words. We want to see a violent end to violent people, but we need to understand the effect violence has on us and on God's good order. We have been both told and shown the path of non-violence.

Right up front I want to say that embracing a path of non-violence does not mean that we are to be doormats, nor are we to make ourselves victims. Non-violence is not a way to disarm the good guys and let evil win. It is a path that takes great wisdom and courage, perhaps far more than most of us possess. Let me explain how this works.

We already know the story of Jesus' arrest; that when the crowds came to take him away Peter drew his sword and cut off an ear and was about to do much more when Jesus stopped him. Jesus saw that the violence to come would not be overcome by more violence.

Jesus succumbed to violence – he did not resist, to the very end. He allowed evil to show its true face, its true nature. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

As I begin to speak of non-violence I would like make something very clear. While Jesus did not use violence, this does not mean that he was a passive victim. Far from it. Jesus never shied away from confrontation, he never hesitated to speak the truth.

Listen to the words he uses. Hypocrites, blind guides, you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness, you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, you serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell, you foolish ones, you are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.

These are not the words of a weak man. In fact, it takes a very strong man to renounce violence, so as I continue speaking let's not think we are not to resist evil, that is not the case at all. We just don't resist evil with evil, which is violence.

By not responding in violence, Jesus disarmed those who killed him. Ghandi understood this, as did Martin Luther King Jr. The civil rights movement in the States was largely non-violent, this is why it worked. When peaceful marchers are beaten the world is outraged. We also see this in the Dakota access pipeline protests today, though the media isn't really reporting on it much.

When peaceful people are abused we are shocked, but once they start fighting back we lose that clarity about who the abuser is. We forget who threw the first punch, we begin to see evil on both sides, and the situation spirals out of control.

I saw this dynamic very clearly in Palestine. The Israelis took military control of Palestine decades ago – the Palestinians live under an occupying army. They are an oppressed people, the Israelis determine who can own land, if they can build, if they can plant – it's a terrible situation that has been going on for more than 50 years.

But, over the decades the Palestinians have organized themselves to fight back. They throw rocks, they use knives, they make bombs; once they do these things, then the Israeli guns become justified. Revenge and retribution become merely evil heaped upon evil. The situation snowballs and gets worse. We find that it's only if we do not react violently that we make it possible for the enemy to renounce their own violence. When we renounce revenge we see that the evil can breed no further evil and is left barren. The violence of the oppressor stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter violence, which shows the exploitation for what it is.

But once the oppressed begin to fight, once both sides have blood on their hands the line between good and evil becomes blurred. Actually, the line disappears entirely. Once we choose violence we become indistinguishable from the original oppressors. Jesus said 'those who pick up the sword will die by the sword.'

By this I don't think he meant only that those who live a violent lifestyle will die a violent death. That's a simplistic interpretation. If we go back to God's response to Habakkuk we read 'Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.' When we pick up the sword, in defiance of Jesus' instruction, then we are not being faithful to God. We have instead placed ourselves among the evil ones who will not survive. It is not the blade of the sword that is killing us, it is the handle.

By grasping the handle of the sword we place ourselves in judgement, we put ourselves on the wrong side of God. Too often we think like Jonah, or Habakkuk; we assume that we are the righteous and we beg for God's judgement to rain down on all those other people.

But we forget that God's judgement applies to all of us. We cry out 'how long, O Lord? How long will you let them continue to do these things?' But we don't realize that God's waiting is to allow both them and us to come to repentance. That by our own hard and impenitent hearts we are storing up wrath for ourselves on that day when God's judgement is revealed. He will repay each one according to her or his deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.

Do we really look forward to that day? Do we really want to keep asking how long? And when that day comes do we want to be found with a sword in our hand and hate in our heart?

How we react to Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus tells a lot about what is in our hearts. If we murmur and complain that this unworthy man was singled out by Jesus to be restored to the Kingdom, then we hold the sword of retribution and are liable to judgement ourselves. If, on the other hand, we rejoice that healing and reconciliation has taken place, then we are already in God's Kingdom.

It comes down to this. We can view Zacchaeus as less than us, undeserving of mercy and proof that injustice continues to reign in the world. Or we can see Zacchaeus as a symbol of hope, a sign that God is reserving his judgement so that all of us can repent and joyfully enter the Kingdom that none of us deserves.

How long, O Lord, will you wait? As long as it takes for us to recognize your mercy and your restorative, life giving justice, I pray.

Amen.