

The Rev. David McCoy, the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2 October 2022
at The Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio -- **Write The Vision.**

We Episcopalians have our scripture readings prescribed for us each Sunday: one from the Old Testament—or also known as Hebrew scriptures—one from the Epistles, and one from the four Gospels. We absorb these readings with varying degrees of interest. Mostly, I think, we pay closest attention to the Gospel reading, as it tells us the stories of Jesus and the apostles.

Alas! To focus solely on those readings is often to miss both a strong link to our common history as well as a message to us in our present moment that comes to us from time to time from the reading from the Old Testament.

Such is the assigned reading we have today from the 7th Century BCE prophet Habakkuk. At first blush, the reading may seem simply to be a complaint by a worshipper of Yahweh that no matter how faithful the protagonist in the account is, the faithful worshipper's experience is that *evil* always seems to triumph over *good*! As Habakkuk writes in today's lesson, "the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous--therefore judgment comes forth perverted."

Now, we can just dismiss these verses as something from a distant past with no relevance for today. Or we can read them with our mind's eye informed by our newspapers, TV, and radio. I suggest that when we take this latter course, we can see a relevance for Habakkuk reading today.

For instance: we regularly and frequently hear, read, see cries from the people of Ukraine for deliverance from attacks from outside their borders who want to persecute the people of the country--attacks where, in an echo of Habakkuk, "Destruction and violence are before them, strife and contention arise."

That comment is surely the situation for the people of Ukraine: "destruction and violence are before them"; thus, we pray each week for their deliverance from assaults upon the people of Ukraine and their country. We hope and pray--affirming the confidence of Habakkuk, in our proclamation identifying with the confident courage of this prophet, "standing watch at (our) watch post, and

stationing (our)selves on the ramparts”. We wonder about Ukraine as Habakkuk wondered about himself and his own countrymen: will “the Lord answer... and say, “write the vision; and make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it”? Yes, even a runner moving quickly by--big letters, big message-- make it plain! As Habakkuk proclaims, “There is still a vision... it will surely come, it will not delay.”

Thus it was for this prophet: holding to a strong faith that adversity will be overcome. Righteousness will prevail.

So what, we may say. That was ancient history; but sometimes we can be informed by what transpired in centuries past. As the poet Seamus Haney writes in “The Cure of Troy”, “It means that someone is hearing/ The outcry and the birth cry/ Of new life at its term. It means that once in a lifetime/ That justice can rise up/ And hope and history rhyme.”

Yes: “justice can rise up” as “hope and history rhyme” --thoughts of a contemporary poet echoing the words of the prophet Habakkuk of centuries past: “There is still a vision...it will surely come, it will not delay.”

All well and good we might say to ourselves--but what of us? We are important, too, and we need some solace and reassurance in our own lives, here, now. What about the struggles and injustices of those of us today, in our county, in our town, we who are here, this morning, in these pews? Yes, we, too, have our own struggles, our own trials.

We are fortunate that in our daily lives we do not hear the same shouts of “Violence!” as Habakkuk describes or that are heard in Ukraine. Yet, we *do* hear cries of “Violence!” in our own communities—but they are most often cries of a different sort, cries of a different kind of violence—more muted, less prominent—but potent and destructive, nonetheless.

They are cries heard from our many neighbors struggling to put food on their tables, clothes on their children, gas in their car--if they have a car. We also hear the cries of victims of *physical* violence--especially of violence by guns, but also violence by domestic abuse, social prejudice, economic inequity for instance.

What to do? How to respond? Habakkuk's response to his troubles is to appeal to his God. We, too, can send up such cries: "Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" But we, too, sometimes feel like neglected worshippers: echoing Habakkuk in our own thoughts: "our prayers are not answered." Or "The Lord just doesn't hear me-- or pay attention to my prayers for help."

That's hard when that happens to us. To feel ignored anytime, by anyone--and especially by the Lord! But let's remember: the Lord is not a stage magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat! The Lord is the one who brought forth the planet Earth, this "mortal coil on which we live and move and have our being."

The Lord is the one who helps us keep strong to be able to combat those who want to take our homes, the places of God's people wherever they may be, places to live and be free--whether that be in Ukraine, or perhaps in our own towns and country. These are the people for whom and the places nearby where, like Habakkuk, we "stand at (our) watch post/and station ourselves on the ramparts, to keep watch what [the Lord] will say to (us), and how he will answer (our) complaint."

The Good News, of course, is that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth the Lord *has* "written the vision". The Lord *has* "made it plain". It is the "vision for the appointed time"-- a time that you and I believe *has* come in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In him is our hope. In him is our promise. And it is in him that we trust in all of life's struggles--be those struggles in Ukraine, in places of personal poverty, in combatting prejudicial activity, in reducing and eliminating racial confrontations, in an end to violence by guns--it is in Jesus of Nazareth that we put our trust and our faith that although we have not arrived at a completely satisfactory time of peace and justice, we continue to strive in his name. It is our own vision and knowledge of him that we know there shines a more glorious light, one that overcomes the darkness.

Thus, we continue to work and watch and pray that justice and righteousness will not only triumph but will also flourish and prevail. As with Habakkuk, "we stand at our watch post,/and station ourselves on the rampart,/to keep watch what he will say to us." "And the Lord answered and said, "write the vision."

My friends, Habakkuk has called us across the centuries, in our own time and in the Lord's name, to "write the vision."