

How Long, God?

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2:1-4
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what God will say to me,
and what God will answer concerning my complaint.
Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.
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.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. (NRSV)*

I

How long, God?

1 in 7 Americans live in poverty. 14%! That’s 4% more than the 10% tithe you ask us to give you for your mission in the world!

I know one of those Americans who live in poverty. His name is Sam. Lives right here in Indiana. Has a full-time job working 40 hours a week for 50 weeks a year. But it pays minimum wage—\$7.25 an hour. You do the math, God. That’s a measly \$14,500 a year, before taxes. How’s Sam supposed to get by on \$14,500 with prices for rent, food, clothes, and transportation the way they are?

Meanwhile, one of our national leaders in Congress recently complained that he’s “stuck” in Washington, D.C., earning only \$172,000 a year. His name is Phil. I read in the news that Phil is worth somewhere between \$3 million and \$7.6 million. Look at the contrast, God! Sam earning \$14,500 and Phil earning \$172,000 with a nest egg of millions

of dollars on the side. Does this seem fair, especially when Phil claims he's not earning enough?

How long, God?

48 million Americans scrounge trying to get enough food to eat. 16 million of them are children. One of these households in Sharon, William, and 5-year-old Amanda. They're getting some great help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps. The program reduces their hunger, but most months the benefits are all gone by the 3rd week, so in the 4th week things get grim for them and hunger gnaws on the edges.

How long, God? Why do you let this happen?

Last summer I was talking with a social worker from a neighboring county. He works with child protective services. He told me about a family where a little girl had no one to care for her. The parents were on meth, the uncles and aunts were on meth, even the grandmother was on meth. No one in the whole extended family was available to raise that little girl.

I know you know all this already, God, but I'm trying to call your attention to it. You're supposed to defend the poor and oppressed, the fatherless and the widow and the stranger. The Bible says so. Moreover you're good and powerful, wise and just. But as far as I can tell, you're not doing much of anything in these situations. I simply don't get it.

How long will we cry for your help, God, and you will not listen? How long will we lament to you and you will not act to save? Trouble slithers around in this world—clear-cut, flat-out wrongdoing. What are you doing to stop it? Or are you just sitting there on your heavenly perch, doing nothing?

I could go on. The women I know who have been raped or psychologically and physically abused. The number of racist thoughts, actions, and speech in this country. The stupid wars in Colombia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and

others. Do I need to name them all? How many people have been killed in these wars? We don't know the exact number, but you surely do. Is it over 3 million people killed? Over 4 million? More to the point, how are you responding to it?

Some days I read the news and feel like wickedness surrounds righteousness. Justice rarely prevails; and your laws, your desires, your hopes and dreams for the world are flagrantly shoved aside. And in the middle of it, where are you and how are you responding? Frankly, I question your methods. Maybe I'm not seeing you clearly. Maybe my eyes are clouded over with my own sin, my own arrogance, or my own stubbornness (of which you know I have in abundance).

Nevertheless, I think my laments are legitimate. Therefore I take my stand at this watchpost of prayer. I station myself here and look to see what you say in response. How will you answer my complaint?

II

[Silence]

III

God, the prophet Habakkuk once asked you similar questions, and in response you told him to "write the vision and make it plain." You assured him that you still have a vision for this world. You implied that you do care about our sorry state of affairs. You inferred that things will in fact change.

You also told Habakkuk that you have "an appointed time." You're not sitting on your hands, but you are striding purposefully forward toward a time still to come. You admitted it looks like you're procrastinating, even though you're not. You urged him to live by faith, to trust you, hope in you, have confidence in you. You urged him to persist faithfully through his days, to keep doing what's right, to keep adding to the storehouse of good (2:2-4).

We here this day look to you, God! From the massive heartaches of our world we pray to you because you are from eternity to everlasting. Who else in all of heaven or earth is like you? Who else has your marvelous ability to outfox and outwit, to mend and make life? O Lord our God, you are holy! (1:12). Your splendor fills the skies. Bright light and sparkling rays flash from your hands. You can make mountains writhe and rivers boil. Your anger can stop evil. You can crush wickedness. At such a powerful God our bodies tremble, our lips quiver, our bones shake, our legs collapse. We wait, holy and mighty God, for your day of justice to blossom (3:3-16).

With the eyes of our hearts we look ahead in faith to when this earth will be so filled with the knowledge of your glory that it will be like water spreading across the ocean (2:14). And while we wait, we will delight in you and your vision.

Even if the fig trees don't flower, we will delight in you!

Even if the vines bear no grapes, we will delight in you!

Even if the olive trees produce nothing, we will delight in you!

Even if the sheep and goats die off, we will delight in you!

Even if the cattle stalls stand empty, we will delight in you!

You inject us with strength! You energize us to run like deer! You usher us to the mountaintop! (3:17-19)

Amen.