

A Sustaining Vision

Gene McAfee
Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church
Lyndhurst, Ohio

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Last Thursday morning, as the smell of roasting turkey wafted from her kitchen through my computer screen, Pat Baker led Dorothy Fitzgerald and me through the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk, you say? Habakkuk, we said? Is there such a book in the Bible? If so, where is it and why haven't I heard of it before?

There is indeed a book of Habakkuk, but if you flip through your Bible quickly looking for it, you'll miss it. It's only three chapters long, and it's nestled in among the other minor prophets. Habakkuk is definitely one of the more minor of the minor prophets. There are twelve minor prophets, and Habakkuk is the eighth of them, and if, like me, you tried to memorize the books of the Bible in their canonical order, when you get past the three major prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – you can suddenly feel as though your memory has hit a patch of black ice and you're skidding through some barely pronounceable and even less memorable names: Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and so forth.

So it's completely understandable if you've never heard of Habakkuk, but there's a reason our religious tradition found in Habakkuk's words something worth paying attention to and worth preserving. There are several reasons, actually, and those reasons are found throughout this short book of the Bible that packs a serious theological punch.

Perhaps the most important message Habakkuk has for us is the message that captured the attention of some New Testament writers, who picked up the prophet's words in chapter two, verse four, "But the righteous live by their faithfulness."

Those words captured Paul's attention, and he echoed them in his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. The Epistle to the Hebrews similarly takes as the starting point of a successful life that we live not by our observance of outward rituals, or, worse, by how many toys we collect before we die, but rather by our inward trust in the God who calls us to live differently from the way the world lives. That's what it means to live by faithfulness – to live trusting in both the truth and ultimate victory of God's way.

That's the call that permeates the Bible from front to back – live differently from the world. That was the call to Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses, Esther and Mordecai, Joshua and Deborah, Mary and Jesus, Phoebe and Paul. Come out from the world, dare to be different, confront the principalities and powers, be the yeast and light and salt that make this world better for everyone and everything. Trust that God will support you in those efforts, provided that you are prepared to make the sacrifices those efforts will demand.

That's what we mean by faith. Faith is trust. Faith is not a set of ideas. What we trust in is what we believe in, and most of us, while we say we believe in God, we actually believe in

the world. We believe in ourselves, we believe in our loved ones, and we believe in our institutions – or at least, we used to.

Part of the crisis of our present moment is that the institutions we've spent five hundred years building – institutions like democracy, science, medicine, law, education, a reformed and reforming church – those institutions are now being assaulted and undermined. It's not enough that we're told individual politicians can't be trusted; we've always known that. Now we're being told that we can't trust our process for the peaceful transfer of power. January 6th was the bitter fruit of that poisonous assault on democracy, and January 6th will be a day that will live in infamy wherever people believe they have the right to choose their own leaders and not have that right taken from them by violent women and men.

"Destruction and violence are before me," Habakkuk said, "strife and contention arise." Isn't that what we saw on January 6th? When some of us didn't get our way on election day, we resorted first to lies and then to violence, and some of us keep that mistrust swirling by warning of elections being stolen. "Strife and contention arise."

I saw an interview with Kathie Lee Gifford the other night in which she said that if you actually read the stories in the Bible in their context, you'd think they were ripped from today's headlines; we came to exactly the same conclusion in last Thursday's Bible study. The prophet Habakkuk, writing between Assyria's destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, and Babylon's destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE, said this about Babylon's threat: "Look at the proud – their spirit is not right within them. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. They come for violence . . . their own might is their god" (1:1-11).

Is that not what we're seeing right now in Ukraine – the predations of people who believe that their own might is their god? Is that not what we saw when Germany annexed the Sudetenland in 1938? Isn't that what we heard in last week's reading from Isaiah, when the Assyrian envoy to Judah told King Hezekiah to surrender or else?

"How long, O Lord," Habakkuk cried, how long will this kind of power-grabbing, power-wielding, and power-mongering last? How long, the prophet asked, and there was no answer. At least not the answer the prophet wanted. Six months? A year? A hundred years? A thousand years?

How long, O Lord, will the violence continue, will the injustice oppress, will the destruction wreak havoc?

The prophet wanted a timeline and we want a timeline. We can put up with anything, we think, if we believe there's eventually going to be an end to it.

And that's what the prophet got – the assurance of an end. "Write the vision," God answered Habakkuk, "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 it does not lie."

How long will human beings behave like human beings? For as long as we've been around and for as long as we're going to be around, that's how long.

One of the points that Pat makes repeatedly in the Bible study because the Bible makes the same point is that the cycle of violence is perpetual in human history, including the history of God's people. The garden story tells us that God created the world good and we messed it up as soon as we arrived. The Cain and Abel story tells us that families are as perilous to human well-being as anything out there in the big, bad world. The story of Israel's freedom from bondage tells us that freedom wrongly used unleashes a torrent of ingratitude and discontent. And the story of Israel's monarchy tells us that rulers will put themselves in God's place whenever they think they can get away with it.

And so on and so forth. History repeats itself because human nature does not change, and that nature is fundamentally flawed. As long as people are around in this world, they will behave badly, individually and in groups. That's what our Reformed doctrine of total human depravity is all about. It means that all human beings, without exception, are born selfish. If there's a parent in the room who can testify that their baby was born altruistic, please speak up because the rest of us would like to meet that miracle. You and I both know that a baby's world is all about the baby and what satisfies that baby's cravings. Babies live for themselves and those things that satisfy them. That's what the Bible means when it speaks of being born of the flesh.

But experience and revelation also teach us that, from time to time, as people grow up, they can overcome that fundamental, inborn, and entirely natural selfishness. It takes a lot of work, it takes a village, and, above all else, it takes the grace of God. That's what it means to be born of the Spirit. That's what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus in their nighttime theology seminar: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Every one of us can be born again, to use that very loaded and very much abused language. We are not just our natural, biological, mammalian selves. Human beings are more than that, and the more that we are is that vision that the prophet Habakkuk was told to write.

"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 it does not lie."

The vision the prophet was told to write is the vision of human beings transcending their human nature, with God's help, in order to respond to God's call. What is that call? It's presented in dozens of different ways in the Bible, and they can all be summed up in words like this: "God has shown you, people, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to practice justice, to love kindness, and to live remembering that God is still in charge."

That was Micah's version of the vision. Here's Jesus' version of the vision: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Here's Paul's version of the vision: "Now abide faith, hope, and love, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

There it is, Christianity in a nutshell. The Christian vision. It's the vision that permeates Scripture. It's the vision that founded the church. It's the vision that gets us back on track when we wander into nationalism, chauvinism, bigotry, and hate.

Christianity's not complicated, it's just hard. It can be summed up simply and succinctly, so succinctly that a prophet could write it in big, clear letters on a tablet so that a runner could read it passing by. Christianity's vision is the realm of God, glimpsed in this world, and waiting to be realized in the world to come.

And that's the vision that sustains us. It's the vision that gets us through the mass shootings, the dog-whistling politics, and the relentless pressure to conform to business-as-usual brutality and cynicism. It's the vision that allows us to confront, to step away, and to step back and take a breath so that we don't have to continue among the tired and the angry. It's the vision of God's will for the world.

On this first Sunday of the new church year, when we begin again, it's entirely fitting that we get our bearings from the prophet Habakkuk, obscure though he may be, and hear his insistence that our role as God's people is to preserve a vision not of what the world is, which is a hot mess, but rather of what the world might be according to the end toward which God intends it and directs it. That is our most important job.

Yes, feeding the hungry is part of our job, and housing the homeless, and calling out injustice – all of that falls within the church's remit. But the one thing that we have that no governmental agency has, that no community-based activism has, and that no self-help guru has is the vision of God's will for all of creation in this world and in any world to come. Keeping that vision alive, proclaiming that vision with our deeds as well as our words, and making that vision as natural to us as breathing in and out – that's what God calls the church to do and to be. That's our job. That's our story. And I'm sticking to it.