

Trees, Walls, and Justice
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October 30, 2022 – Pentecost 21C (Proper 26)
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

This set of texts appointed for today does not come up all that often in the lectionary. Despite that, their undertones are quite familiar: the prophet wondering about what's going on and crying out for justice' the letter commending its recipients for their steadfast faith; and the unsavory character who's desperate to see Jesus and gets reassurance that he is part of God's family in return for his efforts. Habakkuk and Luke in particular point out that justice and redemption are neither defined nor handed out on human terms. They are solely about God, and how God is able to find and reassure the lost, no matter where they might be.

If there is one thing Zacchaeus and the prophet Habakkuk have in common, it's that they use high places to get a better view of what's happening around them. Instead of a leafy sycamore tree, Habakkuk uses the city walls. From there, he watches the advancing army which has come to serve God's justice on an unrepentant people. Even with the grave sins they have committed, it just doesn't seem right to him that God would allow such a thing to happen. Destruction and violence do not constitute justice. Nor is it how things ought to be, if God's promises of a permanent dwelling place for God's people are to be trusted. And yet, it is what they are. On the outside, the Babylonians are breaking down the city's walls. On the inside, so some of the historians tell us, the people have mostly turned away from God, only to do what is evil in God's sight. There isn't room for God's version of justice under these circumstances, at least not as the prophets called for time and time again before this moment. From a human

standpoint, the perpetrators of this heinous crime, whether Babylonian or Israelite, have to be punished as a condition of things being made right again.

I don't doubt all of us here have experienced wishing we could only change things, and perhaps even the desire to get even with someone who's wronged us. But if the notion that getting even is all that justice is, we're in trouble. As one of the many prophets who called the Israelites and their leaders on the carpet about their bad behavior, Habakkuk would have known that all too well. From his perch on the wall, he had to be wondering if what he was seeing was some perverted way for God to get even. If that was the case, there was simply nothing that could possibly be done. The only things that seem to make sense are praying about it, and having faith in the fact that God would respond. Which is why Habakkuk says he's going to stay put and wait for the answer.

And the answer he gets? "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by faith."

Say what?

That doesn't sound like justice, at least not in the sense that we think of it. Unlike how our court system tends to administer it, God's justice, on the other hand, very often requires turning the world upside down, including making sure the hungry are fed, those on the margins of society are cared for, and cutting down the mighty by a few notches. Such actions come from a place of love, not out of anger or a desire to exact revenge,¹ and as such is bigger than simply getting the last laugh at the expense of the

¹ Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4."

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-3/commentary-on-habakkuk-11-4-21-4> [accessed October 28, 2022].

Babylonians. It encompasses everyone, not just those who follow the Law to the letter, or who are otherwise considered socially acceptable. The only catch is that it requires that those who fall under its reach to live by their faithfulness, instead of simply waiting passively for God to deliver justice.²

Zacchaeus is a good example of someone who doesn't engage in this kind of passive waiting. He is so eager to see Jesus that he doesn't wait for the crowd to yield to his pushing and yelling at them to get out of his way. He was short, probably a midget by modern standards, and so had a hard time finding a good spot to begin with. He runs ahead of the crowd, and climbs the nearest sycamore tree so he can get a better view. Jesus somehow knows who's up there, and, despite the grumbling of the crowd, calls out to him and invites himself over for dinner. It's downright scandalous: *He's going to that guy's house? Why would he want to eat dinner with a tax collector, much less a dirty cheat like Zacchaeus? He doesn't deserve it, especially not since he made his money by robbing us – and we're not sure if we can take him at his word that he'll actually pay restitution!*

The discontent we overhear in this moment is coming from the voices of the proud, whose spirit is not right within them. They can't quite believe that Zacchaeus is being rewarded for the injustice he's inflicted on the people of Jericho. Not only is it shocking that Zacchaeus has received the honor of having Jesus as a houseguest, he's also responded to the grumbling of these good church people by standing up straighter

² Dennis Bratcher. "Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4." <http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/proper22ot.html> [accessed October 28, 2022].

and promising to go well beyond what the Law demands in delivering reparations.³ That promise goes a long way toward Zacchaeus redeeming himself. Even so, the crowd struggles with the very idea that Jesus could find someone like Zacchaeus acceptable in the first place – much less want to sit down and eat with him. But. Such an action is typical within Luke, who begins his gospel by announcing that not only is God doing a new thing, but that this new thing will result in an upheaval of the status quo as we know it. And in that, we get the kind of justice Habakkuk and his fellow prophets envisioned, where God responds quickly to the cries of "violence!" and the law is never slack.

Sometimes I imagine what it might have been like to be up in the tree with Zacchaeus, or even on the top of the wall with Habakkuk, waiting for something to happen. Habakkuk in particular seems to be an observant type, the kind of guy who walks around with a pencil and a notebook so he won't forget whatever ideas pop into his head. At this point, up on top of the wall, he's just waiting for God to send a word to him. "What will you have me write?" he asks the air, hoping that the still small voice will tell him something definitive.

"A vision for the appointed time," the voice answers back after what seems like too long an interval of silence. "One that speaks of the end, and does not lie." Habakkuk thinks for a minute, chewing thoughtfully on the end of his pencil. "Living by faithfulness," he finally writes, in big block letters, so clear that a runner can see them. I look at him, puzzled, as he puts the final touches on with a flourish. He catches my eye. "What?" he asks. "What did you think it was supposed to say?"

³ Laura A. Sugg, "Pastoral Perspective: Luke 19:1-10." In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 through Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 262.

“I don’t know,” I finally answer, after thinking it over for a few minutes. “Maybe it’s daring to think that Jesus might call me down out of the tree. Or maybe it’s just being open to the possibility that justice is what will happen if I choose to ask that God clears the way, and shows what healing and wholeness might look like.”⁴

So what’s being written on the tablet of this community, as we stand poised to write the next chapter in St. James’ history? What comes after we welcome people in, in the name of Christ’s compassionate love? In other words, how are we going to live this out, both as individuals and as a community of faith? And is our vision one of the end that does not lie? Only time will tell. But if we live into it, while having faith that God will somehow act to clear the way for us, there is no telling what good things might happen.

⁴ Pamela Cooper-White, “Pastoral Perspective: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4.” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.(Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 244-246.