

## Longing for Encouragement

### I. Advanced Organizer

- A. This Sunday **marks the beginning of Advent**, a four week period the church marks every year to prepare for the coming of Jesus. “Advent” means “arrival” or “coming”.
- B. If you’re like me, **the hustle and bustle and frivolity of the Holidays feels particularly dissonant right now**. Let’s be honest, it’s been a hard year. **John Oliver** recently ended his 2016 season with a grand tribute to the year, as one person after another was invited to say “F You” to 2016, and then John cathartically did this. (show video of blowing up the year)
- C. **Issues of injustice and violence have been splashed across our news sites and facebook feeds**. This was the year of tragedies like the Orlando shooting. It’s the year we watched Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, and Keith Lamont Scott lose their lives to police on video, and more Black Lives Matter uprisings have taken place around the country. We’ve also seen increased violence against police officers, in Dallas, in Iowa, and other places around the country. For the last ten months, Native Americans at the Standing Rock reservation have been defending their land and their water supply through peaceful protests in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, protests which have faced at times violent response, and yet, have failed to stop the progress of the DAPL.
- D. And then, as if any of us could forget, **there’s been the blistering campaign of 2016**, a campaign that has reached new historic lows in its rhetoric and toxicity, and which ended on the night of November 8th in a way that very few of us, including arguably the president elect, were prepared for. And as we look to 2017 and are aware of things like the president elect’s habit of being, as Webster has recently coined, extremely “post-truth”. Perhaps we’re aware of his very troubling connections and comfort with, if not outright embrace of, groups that openly espouse white nationalist beliefs, and so **there is a sense of gravity and foreboding for many about what January and beyond will bring**.
- E. In the midst of all this, I have to confess that **I don’t quite feel in the mood right now to hang some stockings and eat some cookies, just because we’ve passed Thanksgiving on the Calendar**. I’m still grieving the hatred that has been more clearly unmasked this year. I’m grieving the danger my Queer friends, and my friends of color feel. I’m grieving the lessons my children are learning in the public square as our leaders behave in ways I’ve been trying to teach them not to. Perhaps you’re grieving some of these things too.
- F. I think at this time of year, we have a couple of things we might choose to do with this grief. **Some of us might be tempted to paper it over it with Holiday cheer**. Take a deep breath, down another cocktail, pull up Jingle Bells on iTunes, click away on Amazon, and escape the pain with some good old-fashioned traditional merriment. I understand the temptation here. Maybe if we just focus on the fun to be had, the gifts to be given, the trees to be trimmed we’ll forget for a moment all of the fear, all of the grief, all of the pain that we feel powerless to address because it’s so much bigger than any one of us. **But like throwing down a few too many at the office Holiday Party, this kind of coping, always comes back to bite us**. January hits and we find ourselves hung over with a bad headache, a long credit card bill and even more depressed than we were before.
- G. **But I think there’s another approach to our grief during this season, that actually might be more in line with what Advent is meant to be about**. Rather than masking our pain, what if we sat in it for a little while? What if we allowed ourselves to actually feel our fear, our anger, our grief, our discouragement, and from that place of feeling, cry out to God? **What if we allowed our emotions to lead us into our deepest longings - longing for encouragement, longing for wholeness, longing for justice, longing for connection - and from these**

**places of longing we make space to receive the one we celebrate on December 25th?**

What if the next month was less about spending money and eating rich food and more about making our spirits alert to perceive the arrival of God in shocking, unexpected ways, just as poor outcast shepherds, and star-gazing foreigners of other faiths perceived him long ago.

H. **Thankfully, in our spiritual tradition there is a rich legacy to draw upon, should we choose to pursue this second approach.** The later books of the Hebrew Bible are the **writings of the prophets**. These were people who lived in extremely dark days, days where there was also little hope and much to fear and grieve. And yet, in the midst of these dark days, people of God continued to dialogue with Yahweh, and to receive revelations from Him. They spoke longings which we will resonate with. And they often found God in the longing as they looked ahead to a light that would shine in the darkness.

I. Over the next four Sundays, **we're going to be looking at four of these that are often the most ignored.** Called the "minor prophets" because they wrote shorter books. But the words that these messengers of God were nonetheless poignant and important in giving voice to longing, and instructing us in how we turn our needs into openings for God to reach us and grow us, and speak into our lives in meaningful ways.

## II. Habakkuk

A. **Today we start with a little known prophet named Habakkuk.** Habakkuk was likely a songwriter and prophet who ministered in the temple in Jerusalem during the sixth century BC. This was the era of the divided Kingdom, and Habakkuk was part of the Southern Kingdom, Judah. He seemed to write his book between the period in which the Northern Kingdom, Israel, had been obliterated by the foreign Assyrians, and the time the Babylonians would invade Judah, destroy their temple, and lead them into exile in Babylon. It was a dark time. It's likely that Habakkuk had ministered during a time of relative peace and spiritual revival, when the godly King Josiah was in power. It was a time with Judah seemed to be on the right track, executing Justice, and leading the people in faithful worship of Yahweh. But after Josiah, things took a different turn. Josiah's son and grandson were different kinds of leaders. Unjust, power hungry, with hearts that were proud and hard towards God. **Habakkuk seems to be aware of how profound the change in leadership is, and he has longing of his own.**

B. Habakkuk as a book is unique. **It's only 3 chapters of Hebrew poetry, which it seems were written to be sung.** And the song is not just one voice. It's a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk brings God his complaints. He brings him his discouragement. He laments to Yahweh and demands a response. And God answers. The song he writes communicates the conversation Habakkuk perceives. We're gonna look at a few places, beginning with how it starts, the first complaint.

### 1. **Habakkuk 1:2-4**

**O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?**

**Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?**

**3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?**

**Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.**

**4 So the law becomes slack  
and justice never prevails.**

**The wicked surround the righteous—  
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.**

- a) As you can see **Habakkuk doesn't beat around the bush**. He starts strong and doesn't let up. He gets us going with the classic core question we're left with in the face of injustice and tragedy. **"How Long, O Lord?"** How long will you stand by and do nothing? Our leaders are corrupt. Their corruption is hurting the vulnerable and disempowered. *"Destruction and violence are before us...justice never prevails..."* You can hear his longing, right?
- b) Well, God doesn't leave him hanging very long. God begins to tell him, **"You know what, I've got a plan. You know those fearsome neighbors to your East, the Babylonians? I'm gonna let them take care of it. They're gonna come in and overtake your nation and your corrupt leaders will be taken out. I'm on it."**
- c) But this response is understandably troubling to Habakkuk. **God's chosen means of fixing the problem has problems of it's own**, like for instance all the innocent lives that will be impacted as the Babylonians take over Judah. Sure, maybe it means justice for the wicked leadership, but what about everyone else? Habakkuk brings these concerns back to God with his second complaint.

2. **Habakkuk 1:12 - 2:1**

12 Are you not from of old,  
O Lord my God, my Holy One?  
You shall not die.

O Lord, you have marked them for judgment; *(them being the Babylonians here – aren't they the bad guys, God!)*

and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.

13 Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,  
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;  
why do you look on the treacherous,  
and are silent when the wicked swallow  
those more righteous than they?

14 You have made people like the fish of the sea,  
like crawling things that have no ruler.

15 The enemy brings all of them up with a hook;  
he drags them out with his net,  
he gathers them in his seine; *(another kind of fishing net here)*  
so he rejoices and exults.

16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net  
and makes offerings to his seine;  
for by them his portion is lavish,  
and his food is rich.

17 Is he then to keep on emptying his net,  
and destroying nations without mercy?

2 I will stand at my watchpost,  
and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

- a) So you can hear it here, Habakkuk is pretty worked up by God's response. I'm upset about what's happening in my community, in Judah, but how can this be the answer? What, you're just gonna reward the wickedness of the Babylonians? You're just gonna back the bully nations, now? We're just like fish to be swept up in their nets? And behind these questions lingers the greater question: **"Is life totally meaningless?"**

b) **Nihilistic Password Security Questions by Soheil Rezayazdi:**

- (1) *What is the name of your least favorite child?*
- (2) *In what year did you abandon your dreams?*
- (3) *What is the maiden name of your father's mistress?*
- (4) *At what age did your childhood pet run away?*
- (5) *What was the name of your favorite unpaid internship?*
- (6) *In what city did you first experience ennui?*
- (7) *What is your ex-wife's newest last name?*
- (8) *What sports team do you fetishize to avoid meaningful discussion with others?*
- (9) *What is the name of your favorite canceled TV show?*
- (10) *What was the middle name of your first rebound?*
- (11) *On what street did you lose your childlike sense of wonder?*
- (12) *When did you stop trying?*

c) If we're honest, **even when life is going relatively smoothly, disillusionment and discouragement seem to be inevitable destinations.** It's part of growing up, losing our innocence, finding out our parents are the ones filling the stockings. And as adults, that discouragement can often lead to cynicism, and shallow coping mechanisms that numb the sting. We tune out with Netflix and drink more. We choose the Holiday that's an escape rather than facing the longing. But Habakkuk does something different. **He vents to God and he fully expects God to answer him.** *"I will stand at my watchpost...I will keep watch to see what he will say to me."*

d) And this leads us to perhaps our first lesson the prophets have for us this Advent season: **God sees, feels, and responds to our longings and needs.** Maybe this matches the view of God you have, and maybe it doesn't but in the Ancient world this was a pretty radical claim and one that was distinctive of the Hebrew people. They didn't worship a pantheon of capricious gods who let their little petty dramas play out just on a bigger scale, and could care less about the peons beneath them. And they didn't worship a God that was sovereign but impersonal, an unmoved mover. **They worshiped a God who actually cared about them.** Abraham Heschel is a 20th century Jewish scholar who characterized this unique quality of God as *pathos*. God who deeply cares and reacts to the plight of humanity. **God's heart turns towards people and feels compelled to respond.**

e) So how does God respond in his *pathos* to Habakkuk? Something like this:

3. Then the Lord answered me and said:

**Write the vision,**

**make it plain on tablets,**

**so that a runner may read it.**

**3 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.**

**4 Look at the proud!**

**Their spirit is not right in them,**

**but the righteous live by their faith.**

**5 Moreover, wealth is treacherous;**

**the arrogant do not endure...**

**6 Shall not everyone taunt such people and, with mocking riddles, say about them,**

**"Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!"**

- How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge?
- 7 Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,  
and those who make you tremble wake up?  
Then you will be booty for them.
- 8 Because you have plundered many nations,  
all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you—  
because of human bloodshed, and violence to the earth,  
to cities and all who live in them...
- 10 You have devised shame for your house  
by cutting off many peoples;  
you have forfeited your life.
- 11 The very stones will cry out from the wall,  
and the plaster will respond from the woodwork.
- 12 “Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed,  
and found a city on iniquity!”
- a) God is telling Habakkuk that **justice is coming**. Though it seems dark now, and it seems like there is only more dark to come in the immediate future, the end is assured. Things may get worse before they get better, but at the end of the day justice will reign. God is taking the long view, and he’s inviting his followers to do so too.
- (1) *“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.”*
- (2) It’s like God is saying, “I know things look bleak,” but this is just a moment. No doubt, it’s a bad moment, but this moment will not have the last word.
- (3) Remember Tolkien’s Two Towers:
- (a) *“It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end... because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing... this shadow. Even darkness must pass.” - Sam*
- (4) God is saying: **Take courage. Be encouraged. I am with you. I haven’t abandoned you. Tell everyone you know, even when bad things go down, I am with you. And evil and injustice will not have the last word. I will redeem this. You can trust me.**
- (5) Point 2: **Sometimes God brings encouragement by changing our perspective.** In a sense, nothing has changed for Habakkuk. But in another sense, everything has. **Nihilism is ultimately the belief that everything is utterly meaningless. There’s no grand story.** But the life of faith asserts something different. It says we are a part of a greater arc of history. We are in a story, and it is going somewhere. While life may be difficult, and at times outright dark and dangerous, we are part of journey that a Living God is taking all of humanity on. A journey toward reconnection. A journey toward restoration and redemption. A journey that will have highs and lows but in which we can walk with a loving parental God who cares about us and is taking us somewhere good. That is a hope we can stand in. **That is how, as God says to Habakkuk, “the righteous live by faith.”**
- (6) Emmanuel prayer story -

- (a) A few years ago I had **one of the darkest seasons I've gone through**, in which I experienced painful rejection from people I cared about for expressing my convictions.
- (b) The climax of this season was **a painful conversation** in which I experienced rejection from someone who had a lot of authority over me, and their ultimate disagreement and rejection of me was extremely devastating. Had huge implications for my future and the future of my dreams.
- (c) A few weeks after the event went down, I found myself in a **prayer time with Jesus, practicing a prayer practice I've come to know in recent years called Emmanuel Prayer**.
- (d) The essence of Emmanuel Prayer is that Jesus is given the name Emmanuel which means "God with us", and this practice recognized that in **a real way the living Jesus is with us in whatever is happening**, we just don't always perceive him. But sometime, in memory Jesus can communicate to us where he was, and how he views the hard things in our lives (as well as the good ones too)
- (e) **Had an experience of Jesus with me in a memory of the event**; felt like he opened my eyes to what was happening. Jesus writing in the carpet with one hand; hand in the small of me back with other.
- (f) Brought me to the adulterous woman story. Jesus was not drawn into the anxiety of that group, and he was not down into demonizing or condemning the woman. He defended her. He was doing the same thing for me.
- (g) Totally changed my sense of the experience. Immensely healing.

**(7) So how does Habakkuk respond to his change in perspective?**

4. Habakkuk 3:2, 17-19

**O Lord, I have heard of your renown,  
and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.**

**In our own time revive it;**

**in our own time make it known;**

**in wrath may you remember mercy...*(he describes many mighty things God has done in the past and then turning to the present he says this...)***

**Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;**

**though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;**

**though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls,**

**18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord;**

**I will exult in the God of my salvation.**

**19 God, the Lord, is my strength;**

**he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.**

- a) Habakkuk turns from lament and complaint to worship and encouragement. He stands in his experiences of old. He stands in the stories he's received. He stands in something bigger than his circumstances, and those give him the courage to face them. **To "encourage" doesn't just mean to make somebody feel a little better.** It means to **make them strong**. To put courage in them, where there wasn't.
- b) This is our third lesson from Habakkuk. **Connection to the living God is our source of courage in the face of darkness and fear.** Habakkuk is now in a place where he

can look at the worst possible outcome. It may come to this. Utter ruin. Utter devastation. No wealth. No food. Not even a peace of fruit on the vine. And yet the Lord is my strength. He will help me tread upon the heights. He will bring me out of the valley of despair and place me in the high place, just like he's done with my spirit.

C. So how do we take the wisdom and example of Habakkuk and experience God's encouragement this Advent season? I'd like to end with a couple of practical tips.

1. **Make intentional time for lament and longing this Advent.** This can look different ways for different people, but I'm gonna make a suggestion. I grew up doing Advent calendars, now I do them with my kids, something we open every day counting down the days toward Christmas, a bit of candy or small toy inside. **What if we pursued a grownup daily Advent ritual?** Instead of opening a box we're opening ourselves. For 5 minutes a day, every day for the next four weeks, before we go to bed or when we get up in the morning, we light a candle, and we bring to God out longing for the day. What are we lamenting? What's our complaint? What's troubling us today? Can we sit in that with God, naming our complaints and expecting his heart of *pathos* to respond?
2. **Look for activities and practices that shift your perspective.** So I don't want to be all baa humbug or grinchy about the Holiday season either. While I earlier warned against the habit of just papering over our pain in this season, I think there is an alternative of participating in the joyous pieces in helpful ways, held still in tension with lament. As a parent, much of this for me has to do with seeing my kids experience traditions and wonder in the same way I did as a child. Seeing that brings me to a place of hope. There are other ways as well: watching people connect through the beauty of music - I get to sing with my choir next weekend in the annual Holiday concert - that takes us out of our cynicism and despair and lets us experience some of the bigger story we're a part of. A story of beauty. Generosity points to God's generosity with us and all creation. All of these can helpfully expand our worldview and keep us from becoming choked in despair.
3. **Get creative as you get courageous.** Habakkuk turns his encouragement from God into a song. So when you get glimpses of the bigger picture that give you courage, what might you do? Write a song? Write a poem. Journal. Cook a meal for someone or make a gift. Think of ways you can creatively respond and help that courage move from simply a feeling to a way of acting in the world.