

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
5 October 2025

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Today, we have an incredible passage from one of the most obscure prophets in the Jewish Scriptures. Habakkuk has the distinction of being the prophet about which we know the least. The only things we know come from the book itself and from a reference to the prophet in an apocryphal book, called the Greek Additions to the Book of Daniel. Habakkuk 1:1 describes the author as “A Prophet.” When many read the liturgical song of the book’s third chapter, they believe Habakkuk was a descendant of Levi and a “Temple Prophet.” We know about these prophets because of 1 Chronicles 25:1, “David and the officers of the army also set apart for the service (of the Tent of Meetings) the sons of Asaph, and of Herman, and of Jeduthun, who were to prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals.”

Another Jewish tradition developed because of the Hebrew origins of his name, which literally means “Embrace.” Some believe he was the son of the Shunammite woman Elisha blessed in 2 Kings 4:8-37. In the Greek Additions to Daniel, the prophet Habakkuk is miraculously transported by God to Babylon to feed Daniel when he is in the Lion’s den. That’s it! Habakkuk may have been a musician, the son of a biblical character, or a cook sent to feed Daniel in the den.

The small book was most likely written around the year 609 BCE. The work is structured in three parts: Two laments or complaints to God, two responses from God, and a song of praise. Our reading for today gives us the first lament in chapter one and God’s second response in chapter two. Let us talk a bit about the context. The Assyrian empire had been the main political force in the near Middle East for most of the 8th and 7th centuries, but in October of the year 626 BCE, the Babylonians defeated the Assyrians outside of Babylon. Israel suddenly became a free nation under the reformer king, Josiah. With Assyria gone and Babylon in the early stages of empire building, there was a power vacuum in the Near Middle East, and Egypt used the opportunity to attack Israel in the year 609 BCE. Josiah was killed in battle, and the Egyptians proceeded to rape, pillage, kill, and destroy at will. Many Israelites turned a blind eye or joined in the abuse, most likely out of fear. It is this chaos and bloodshed Habakkuk is complaining about.

The prophet’s first complaint to God includes the following three questions: “a. How long will you ignore my cries for help? b. How long will you ignore the violence in our country without saving us? c. Why do you make me see wrongdoing and trouble?” Everywhere the prophet looked he saw violence, strife,

injustice, the wicked violating the rights of the innocent, justice perverted, and bloodshed. The prophet uses three couplets in his complaint. 1. Wrongdoing and trouble, which point to political and social corruption or lawlessness. 2. Destruction and violence point to warfare which results in mass destruction of property and loss of life. 3. Strife and Contention, point to suffering caused by perverted justice as the legal system fails to protect Israel.

God's first response, not given in our text, simply states, "I am arousing a dreadful and fearsome nation. Their horses are swifter than leopards... they fly like an eagle swift to devour... they laugh at every fortress ... their own might is their god" (Habakkuk 1:5-11). In short, God will use the mighty Babylonians to defeat the abusive Egyptians and punish them for their violence. Habakkuk has heard about the Babylonians, and he is terrified that they will be worse than the Egyptians. This leads to his second lament, "The medicine is worse than the illness, how long will you allow Babylon to destroy nations without mercy?" What Habakkuk wants is the punishment of Egypt and freedom and progress for Israel. But God is about to send a stronger tyrant to defeat a weaker one, and the prophet fears what will happen to Israel. But he also knows that Israel is hardly completely innocent. Many have joined the Egyptians in the plunder and pillaging. God will punish Egypt and cleanse his own nation. The medicine is bitter, but necessary. It is at this point that God gives the prophet his second answer.

God says, "Write this vision, make it plain, and make it practical. 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." In other words, God will hold the greedy, violent, self-indulgent, and idolatrous nations to account. Babylon's time will one day end. Greece's time will one day end. Rome's time will one day end. All human power is transitory. Only God endures forever. God says, "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith." Habakkuk is invited to trust that God will one day right all the wrongs of the earth. The day will come when God will vindicate the suffering of his people and liberate Israel from their chains. But the prophet must continue to be righteous (faithful), and he must trust that God will do the saving. God is in control of history and alone will create the right conditions for the liberation and salvation of Israel. This section ends with an incredible reminder to the prophet and to all of us. "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!"

It is almost impossible to exaggerate Habakkuk's influence on the development of the New Testament, the advent of the Protestant Reformation, and our Church today. A statement from Dallas Theological Seminary, claims Habakkuk is "as contemporary as the morning newspaper." In Roman's 1:16-17,

Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith... as it is written ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” Then in Galatians 3:10-11, he says, “It is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” In Hebrews 10:37-38 the author states, “In a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; for my righteous one will live by faith.” Then the author expands on this idea of faith by giving us Hebrews 11, which is one of the most important chapters on faith in Scripture. These are just three passages that quote Habakkuk 2:4 in an almost verbatim fashion. It is difficult to believe in Paul’s understanding of salvation by faith without this small prophetic book.

Soon after start of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther said the following, “Before those words of Habakkuk broke upon my mind, I hated God and was angry with him because, not content with frightening us sinners by the law and the miseries of life, he still further increased our torture by the gospel. But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood those words – ‘The just shall live by faith! The just shall live by faith!’ – then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God.”

The idea that the righteous lives by faith and that salvation is a free gift of God we obtain by faith alone were the bedrock principles of the Reformation. The reformers summarized this through five “solas” (Latin for only): “Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, Sola Scriptura, and Soli Deo Gloria.” (through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, as expressed in Scripture alone, and the glory belongs to God alone.” These five “Solas” were often summarized by the term “Solafideism.” The faith alone principle was foundational to the Reformation. Habakkuk 2.4 provided the biblical basis for a movement that changed the world.

Of course, all of this research brings us to today. We too live in a world groaning under the weight of violence, inhumanity, godless governments, division, strife, poverty, and injustice. It is easy to feel abandoned by God. This obscure prophet reminds us today that God is in control. Tyrants are here only for a season for only God lives forever. There is a vision appointed for our future. God will wright all the wrongs of the world. Evil will be held to account. God will vindicate those who suffer. We are called today to have faith. As Brazilian author Fernando Sabino once said, “Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, then it's not the end.” We must trust in God. Christ is the Lord of history, and God still dwells in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence! Amen, come Lord Jesus, come!