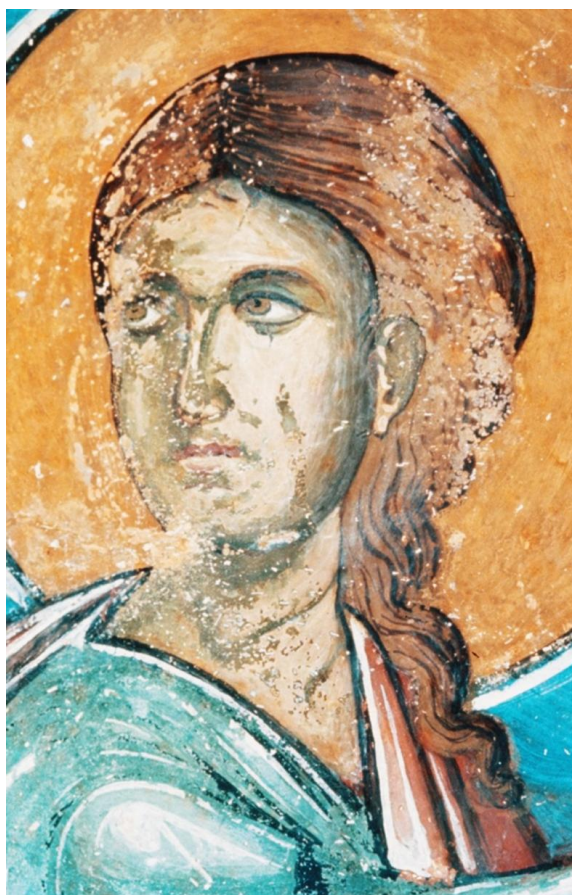




Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Habakkuk
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; August 16, 2026
 Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 13

In the spring of '99, our eldest, Samuel, was a freshman at CN when his beloved high school teacher and mentor, Janie Slayton, invited him to join a group of Jefferson County students on a trip to Washington, D.C. Two other teachers you know and love, David and Linda Noonkesser, were also along for the trip. And what's a visit to our nation's capital without a stop at our nation's church, the Washington National Cathedral? While there, Samuel wandered into the bookstore, where he spotted a red Episcopal prayer book, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and bought it for his mother. I have it with me today. I was touched by the gift, but I could never have imagined how important that little red book would become to my faith journey. At the time, I was beginning to sense the Spirit nudging me away from test tubes, petri dishes, high-tech instruments, and laboratory management and toward seminary and a vocation in ministry—though I had no idea yet how that might happen.

So, what role did *The Book of Common Prayer* play in that process? Well, thank you for asking. But first, let me tell you a little about it. *The Book of Common Prayer* is the central worship book of the Episcopal Church. It's a collection of liturgies, prayers, sacraments, pastoral rites, and daily prayers. While I found many parts of the book of interest, what really caught my attention—and has continued to do so for more than 26 years—was the Psalter, the Book of Psalms. In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Psalter is arranged into a 30-day cycle of morning and evening prayers, allowing one to pray through the entire book of Psalms each month, using the Psalms as bookends to each day—which is exactly what I did. During some difficult days and nights, praying through the Psalter kept me anchored. The experience taught me to love the Psalms. More importantly, it taught me something essential about prayer: we can be honest with God, and The Psalms give us permission to do so.

As a Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton chanted his way through the entire Psalter every week. He prayed the Psalms so often that their words became part of his very being—like nourishment for his soul. As Merton observed, “We bring to the Psalms the raw material of our poor, isolated persons, with our own individual conflicts, sufferings and trials.”ⁱ That is one of the greatest gifts of the Psalms: they make room for the whole of our lives.

The Psalms can be grouped in a variety of ways but for our purposes this morning, let's consider six types. Within the 150 psalms, there are Thanksgiving psalms, which remind us to acknowledge God's goodness and tell others what God has done. Wisdom psalms ponder the mysteries of life and invite us to look more deeply at ourselves and at God. Royal and prophetic psalms speak of God's rule and point toward the Messiah and the coming of God's kingdom. Trust and protest psalms express confidence in God while also calling upon God to bring about justice. Psalms of praise lift our eyes and hearts toward the greatness and majesty of God. And finally, there are psalms of lament—cries for help in moments of distress, grief, and frustration.

Overall, The Book of Psalms reminds us that prayer is not about hiding what we feel or putting on a brave face before God. A fitting example is found in Psalm 13, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart? Consider and answer me...” The psalmist shows us the importance of communicating with God—even, and perhaps especially—in the worst moments of our lives.

And it's here that Habakkuk enters our conversation this morning because Habakkuk's words sound remarkably like a psalm of lament—honest and unguarded. Instead of a polished prayer, he gives voice to the ache and the bewilderment that he is experiencing. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?”

While Habakkuk identifies himself as a prophet, we know little else about him. Likely a contemporary of Jeremiah, he prophesies to Judah in the decades leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. At the time, King Jehoiakim, a puppet of the Egyptian pharaohs, reigns over Judah. He makes the spiritual crisis in Judah even worse through a series of bad decisions and repressive policies. Habakkuk looks around and sees the corruption of the leaders of God's people and he is sickened. He observes how indifferent they are to the laws of God and the well-being of the people. He recognizes how their sin harms those they are charged with helping. Immorality has become the accepted norm, and evil is running rampant throughout the land. In the face of this downward slide into utter chaos, Habakkuk questions why God appears to be so far away. Why isn't God moved by the sufferings of the righteous?ⁱⁱ

Ultimately, within the brief three chapters that make up the book of Habakkuk, God assures the prophet that he *does* oppose evil and that he *does* intend to chastise the guilty. But it doesn't happen all at once and God doesn't address all of his questions. Even so, Habakkuk remains deeply committed to listening to God, waiting for God, and trusting in God.

In commentary on this text, Episcopal priest, Barbara M Musselman, notes that through the experience of Habakkuk:

God affirms that when circumstances are bleak and God's way seems bewildering, the righteous live by faith. God's faithful people learn to frame events in terms of the redeeming character and power of God. They understand that God is always working toward the right and good, even in and through devastating events. In spite of what they may see and experience in the time prior to God's appearing, the upright choose to be oriented toward God in faithfulness, especially when God does not appear to make sense.ⁱⁱⁱ

God doesn't turn away when we wrestle with our faith. That's what we witness in the life and prophecy of Habakkuk. He gives us permission to pray the prayers we sometimes think are too angry or too painful to bring before God. He reminds us that faith isn't the absence of questions. Faith is the courage to bring our questions to God and stay in the conversation. So, when you find yourself looking at the world and thinking, "This just isn't right," don't turn away—pray. When your heart is breaking and you can't understand where God is—pray. When you are angry about injustice, bewildered by suffering, or simply tired of waiting for things to change—pray. Bring it all to God—the joy *and* the grief, the gratitude *and* the anger, the certainty *and* the doubt. God can bear it. And then, like Habakkuk, watch and wait. Not because waiting is easy, and not because we are assured quick or satisfying answers. But rather, we wait because faith teaches us that what we can see is not all there is. We wait because there are times when all we can do is cry, "How long?" and trust that our cries will be heard.

The Book of Psalms, the prayer book of the Hebrew people, models a deep and expansive life of prayer. And the prophet Habakkuk shows us how important it is to pray as honestly as we can. Because God is not taken aback by our hard questions. God is not offended by our lament. And God does not abandon us in the waiting. Oh, we will not get all the answers we want, and we may not be able to fully see what God is up to. Such is life. But if we stick with it—if we stick with God—day after day—if we keep turning toward God—our prayers will grow into deeper trust, and our trust into a deeper confidence that even when we cannot see the way forward, we never walk alone. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*

ⁱⁱ Barbara M. Musselman, Commentary on Habakkuk in *The Life with God Bible*, NRSV.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

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