

## The Great Complaint

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent  
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Habakkuk had a complaint, and the opening line of his book gets right to it: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” The prophet is desperate, bereft, and at his wits end. The God he knows is a God who responds and that God is not responding. Habakkuk complains that the world is falling apart.

- He points to violence, calls it by name, and God does nothing.
- He points to injustices and thefts. Nothing.
- His society is being destroyed and violence prevails. Nothing.
- People once united are at odds with each other. Nothing. No response. Not a sound. The chaos prevails.

And worst of all, those who perpetuate the violence and chaos seem to thrive. And the lives of the victims get more and more difficult.

Habakkuk voices what is, perhaps, *the* great complaint. *The* great and valid complaint of humanity toward God. It takes on many different articulations, but sounds something like this: “You, O God, are supposed to be in charge, but this world seems to be divinely mismanaged. Are you sure you know what you’re doing? Have you noticed that the rich and powerful and violent seem to be getting more and more so? And have you noticed that the poor and meek and weak seem to get more and more so? Did you forget your priorities? Did you misplace the game plan? If you need more examples of what’s going wrong, I can provide plenty.”

- The great complaint is the complaint of the Israelites in the wilderness: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exodus 17:3)
- The great complaint is the complaint of Job: “God gives me up and casts me into the hands of the wicked.” (16:11)
- The great complaint is the complaint of the psalmist: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (13:1)
- And the great complaint is Jesus’ complaint on the cross: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:35)

In our year of Claiming and Proclaiming the biblical narrative as formative and transformative in our common life, let us absorb that *complaint* permeates the Bible and plays a role in religious traditions centered on the Bible. I remember my father, also a preacher, singing to his congregation that great southern melody with words by William Walker: “I am a great complainer that bears the name of Christ / Come, all ye Zion mourners, and listen to my cries / I've many sore temptations, and sorrows to my soul / I feel my faith declining, and my affections cold.”

We tend to think that complaining is a sign of faithlessness because it is a sign of weakness. The strong and faithful person does not complain because he doesn't let things bother him. She is able to look on the brighter side of things, make a positive change, and never let folks know she feels otherwise. While these can be good traits, it is exhausting trying to ignore that which bothers or threatens us. Personally, I find it refreshing that complaint is a valuable component in a life of faith.

Habakkuk is a great complainer. He's great at it because he's matter-of-fact and to the point. He's great at it because he takes his complaint to the one who most needs to hear it, the God of Israel. The God of Israel, also known as Yahweh, Adonai, El Elyon, El Shaddai, Hashem initiated and entered into a covenant with Israel, promising to love and protect the people. But now, the world is in disarray. As Habakkuk observes the international scene, world powers use Israel as a strategic chess piece. One empire, the Assyrians, are on their way out, and another, Babylon, also known as “the Chaldeans” are on the rise. A few years ago, Habakkuk was willing to accept that the Assyrians were sent by God as a warning to Israel to shape up, to return to the covenant. But now, God is sending, of all people, The Chaldeans - the ruthless, ferocious, unscrupulous, dastardly Chaldeans. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?”

Does this sound at all familiar? Do you find yourself wringing your hands and wondering why things are the way they are? Do you find yourself assigning blame - it's the Democrats, the Republicans, the rich, the poor, the terrorists, pacifists, men, women, Christians, secularists, Muslims, atheists? When those thoughts come to your mind, when your complaint is clear, what do you do with it? Where do you go with it? If you're like me, you often swallow it in helplessness or lash out in self-righteous fury. Is there another way? Is there some way to bring our complaint to God so that we might be open to a response? What does Habakkuk do?

Habakkuk stands at his watchpost, stations himself on the rampart, and keeps waits "to see what [God] will say to me, and what [God] will answer to my complaint" (2:1). Scholars tell us that Habakkuk was likely someone who had a role in Jerusalem's Temple worship. The temple was located at a high point in the city and would have had watchposts near it, and ramparts as part of the city's protection. Perhaps Habakkuk had an assigned watchpost. Perhaps he wrote this poem after days, weeks, even months of standing at that post, watching the world fall down around him. Metaphorically, the watchpost is a place wherein your duty is to keep watch and to wait. It is a high place, with perspective, perhaps with a 360 degree view. The prophet Habakkuk vows his complaint to that high place, to get some perspective, and to wait and see what God will say to him. In a word, Habakkuk commits himself to a period of "discernment." Discernment is the opening of oneself to a word from God. And not only a word, but a direction. A task. A purpose. And so he waits...

Waiting at his watchpost, Habakkuk receives God's response. And it is startling: "Write the vision," God says. In response to Habakkuk's complaint, God reminds Habakkuk of the importance of vision. The broad view. The long view. And it's not only a vision, but vision with feet. "Write the vision," God says, "make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it." Scholars interpret this passage in different ways. One suggests that it needs to be plain and easily legible so that a foot messenger may decry it as he runs from village to village. Another suggests that this vision, the vision of God in a desperate time, presumes action, so that the one who reads it becomes a runner, running to enact the vision.

Before Habakkuk learns the content of the vision, God reminds him reminded that the vision is an enduring vision and that it is a vision worth waiting for: “There is still a vision for the appointed time;” the text says, “it speaks of the end, and it does not lie. It if seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” In these lines, God responds directly to Habakkuk’s complaint. Habakkuk, my child, I know it seems as though things are off track. I know it seems as though I’m lagging behind. But wait, just a little while longer. Trust me. The new day will surely come. You have my word.

And finally, the content of the vision. But before I go there, I feel like I need to tell you not to get your hopes up, because it’s something you already know. Isn’t that the way it is with the God of Israel, the God of the Church? God doesn’t reveal esoteric truths that we would never have imagined on our own. God reveals to us the contents of our own heart and points out the better part, the part that makes all the difference. Okay, with that warning of potential underwhelm-ment, here goes. The content of the vision is: “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.”

Assuming you might be a little disappointed, let me try to flesh this phrase out a bit. Habakkuk, in his watchpost, discerns that God is calling him to *trust*. And God calls him to do this even as the world crumbles around him. World powers duke it out and lives are lost. His fellow Israelites rush about crying doom and losing hope, or else their not just going about their business, pretending as if nothing at all is happening. “That being the case, Habakkuk,” God says, “trust. Those who are self-proud are all out of sorts. They don’t know themselves and they can’t and won’t endure. You’re different, because you trust in me.”

Reformation Sunday was last week, so it is appropriate to point out that Martin Luther, in his bible, in the Book of Habakkuk, in the margin next to verse 4, wrote the word “*sola*.” That word marked an important development in is thought, the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. “The righteous live by their faith.” *Sola*. Only. By faith alone.

I want to tease out the meaning of the rest of that verse. First, if the word “righteous” confuses you or bothers you, remember that righteous is not the same as *self*-righteous. A righteous person is someone who is trying to follow the path of Jesus, trying to discern God’s movement in her life. Secondly, the Hebrew word for “life” used in this passage, when used elsewhere in the Old Testament, suggests abundant life, or a fully-lived life. So, the vision that God gives Habakkuk to write in big, block letters so that someone can read as they are running to proclaim it and to put it into action is: Those who desire to follow God learn to live fully, no matter what the situation around them, by trusting God. Or more tersely, God-followers live fully by trusting.

Bear in mind that God never dismisses Habakkuk’s complaint. God, it seems, can take it. Then, God broadens the complainer’s perspective by hundreds-fold. God reminds that there is a living vision at the heart of who we are. God encourages endurance by reminding us to trust, not in looks, not in belongings, not in power, but in God. “You who seek me, trust in me, and you will live fully no matter what is the situation of the world.”

Habakkuk discerned this vision in his watchpost, the place set aside to wait and watch. In going there, he learned to trust again. Where’s your watchpost? Go there. Wait. Watch. Be ready to write it down. Be ready to run. “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and it does not lie. It if seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” Amen.