

In the most recent list of popular boy baby names, Biblical names make a good showing; about 50% of the top 10 are from the Bible: Noah, Joseph, Nathan, Thomas, and Luke all fare well. It's somewhat remarkable how these ancient names out of Scripture keep coming back into style. However, there's one name that has likely never made a popular baby boy name list since such lists were compiled, and that's Habakkuk. Right? I mean, has anyone here known a single person named Habakkuk, ever? For one thing, it's hard to spell. All those "k"s and "a"s. For another, it's awkward to pronounce. Most people say Hab'akkuk, some say Habak'kuk, and a lot just avoid saying it at all. We were joking at our clergy text study that the name sounds like a kind of food, possibly a fish: you could imagine the wait staff asking you, "Would you prefer halibut, haddock, or Habakkuk for your entrée this evening"? Not only is the name unfamiliar, but so is the prophet and his writings. So, here's a little helpful information in that regard.

Within scripture, there are three major prophets and 12 minor prophets. The designation of being a major or minor prophet doesn't have to do with chronology or importance, but simply with the length of the writings the prophet has left us. So, the three *major* prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and each of those books are fairly lengthy. The 12 *minor* prophets are Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jonah, Haggai, Zechariah, Obadiah, Joel, and Malachi. Quite a few of them are mouthfuls actually, aren't they? Some of the minor prophets, like Amos or Micah, spoke very important words that we still treasure today. As I said, they are "minor" just because the books they left behind are shorter. Others of the minor prophets are definitely less well known, Habakkuk among them. This doesn't mean they were not significant figures historically or that they didn't leave us a body of wisdom worth pondering, simply that they are

less familiar within our scriptures and our lectionary. This morning we consider Habakkuk, who prophesied in the southern Kingdom of Judah around 600 BC. Last week, we pondered the words and vision of Isaiah, who also prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah, but over 100 years earlier. So, different time, same location. And as you see, we are working our through this Narrative Lectionary through history, leading up towards the birth of Christ. The world stage for Isaiah was dominated by the neighboring power of Assyria. By the time of Habakkuk, it was Egypt and Babylon, also neighboring countries, that were the dominant powers and threats for the small nation of Judah. Judah knew they were in peril, and in fact, in 587, 23 years after Habakkuk began to prophesy, Judah will fall to Babylon, the great temple in Jerusalem will be razed to the ground, and a good portion of the population will be exiled. The doom the people fear is not far off, and yet Judah itself is beset with corruption and a tremendous gap between a few wealthy people and a vast majority of struggling peasants. We discussed last week that the prophets were mouthpieces for God's quarrels with an often unjust and ungodly world, and so it is in our lesson today. All was not well, and God was not pleased, and Habakkuk takes up God's quarrel with the world in his time and place.

There are only three chapters that comprise the entire book of Habakkuk, and we have a portion of each chapter in our lesson for today. The first portion, from chapter one, is the prophet's lament over all that has gone wrong and is broken. The second portion is the Lord's answer to the prophet's lament. The third portion is actually a hymn that moves from being almost painfully poignant to being powerfully infused with hope. All of this fits in beautifully with the themes of this Advent season which we begin today, a season that acknowledges

darkness and struggle with lament, that looks for a word from the Lord, *and* that moves from longing to hope. Let's dig a little deeper.

Habakkuk's lament in our first section of text sounds practically ripped from the headlines, doesn't it? He speaks of violence, wrongdoing, destruction, strife, perverted justice. How many mass shootings were there in our country this last week and how many died? How do things look in war-ravaged Ukraine? How unbelievably contentious is our governing and judicial system? I find the prophet's opening question to be so heartfelt and intense: "Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help?" We hear this query, "How long, O Lord?" not only here, but in other prophetic books and within the psalms. I'm convinced that each of us has our own "how long, O Lord?" within us. Do you know what yours might be? How long, O Lord, before shootings of the innocent in stores and clubs and schools come to an end? How long, O Lord, before the people of Ukraine are free from warfare and hardship? How long, O Lord, until we acknowledge our need to change our ways in regard to how we treat our planet earth? Or on a more personal level...how long, O Lord, before my wrist and hand fully recover and I can play handbells or the piano with joy? How long before your pain, either physical or emotional, is eased? How long before that estranged relationship begins to heal? How long before all of your hard work pays off in some tangible way? O Lord, how long? We understand the prophet's lament, and we can lament with the best of them. But encountering these words of lament within Holy Scriptures should be a reminder to us that as people of faith, *lament is an act of faith*. We don't have to plaster a fake smile on our face and put a cheap Band-Aid over our broken hearts, not at all. God already knows our pain, and our honest acknowledgement of it to God, even if it comes out angry or despairing, is an act of faith we encounter biblically time and time again.

Even, and maybe especially, we need to hear these words now as this holiday season begins. Inflated hype and expectations tend to exaggerate the unhappiness or struggles we have, but we don't have to pretend to be holly-jolly if we're not. To lament to God is a faithful action, and God responds, just as happens next in our text this morning.

The second section of our text this morning begins with the words, “Then the Lord answered me and said, ‘Write the vision’”. These words may remind us of last Sunday’s lesson from Isaiah, where *that* prophet laid out God's *vision* of Shalom, of a world where swords are beaten into plowshares. Very often, the prophets are proclaiming God's vision for the world as it should be, as Habakkuk is to do here. In this text, there is an emphasis on time and how we experience it. We are encouraged to be patient, even if the time seems long and the coming of the vision delayed, we are to hold fast to the vision and wait for it with patience. And that's a big ask, isn't it? The very reason we cry out, “How long O Lord?”, is that often God's vision and response *do* seem delayed in coming to us, and we grow weary of waiting. Advent, as a liturgical season, has an overall theme of waiting. Through this season, we wait, with longing and hope, and perhaps impatience and bewilderment, for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Of necessity, we do a lot of waiting in this life, and the season of Advent hopes to teach us something about *how* to wait. As this text acknowledges, that for which you hoped may seem to tarry, it may seem delayed, we may well cry out, “How long O Lord?” And yet, just as our Advent waiting leads inevitably to the birth of Christ at Christmas, so all of our waitings are times when God is in the mix, working around us and about us, finding a way to break into our situation and answer us with hope. What is required is that oh-so-difficult ability: patience. Don't give up. Just keep waiting, hoping, trusting. As the final verse of this section reminds us, “the righteous live by

their faith.” And that’s truth, isn’t it? Living as a person of faith always requires trust, patience, and hope, including in our times of waiting.

The final section of our text this morning is in the form of a hymn, a hymn that begins with an incredibly evocative description of desolation and yet ends on a note of praise. At our Tuesday morning lectio group, the first verses of this third section caused many to think of Ukraine. Listen to the words again, as you reflect on the destruction of Ukraine’s agricultural industry as well as their infrastructure, with winter approaching—“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, yet...” That description of a land lacking in so many ways is indeed poignant, especially if one thinks of Ukraine or other devastated areas, whether the devastation is a result of war or environmental degradation. Is there a sadder image than hungry people amidst ruined land? But did you hear that final “yet”, that word of unbelievable resiliency? “Yet”, we read, “I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.” A huge turn-around happens in that 3 letter word, “yet”, as the prophecy moves from a very visual picture of all that is desolate to a defiant proclamation of praise to God that cannot be stifled. Even in the midst of terrible times; even when God seems slow to respond and all that we hope for is delayed and we grow weary; even then....God is good and worthy of praise. And from within our faithful souls, that praise, that song of hope, emerges. Because we know that God is Emmanuel, which means, ‘God with us.’ We know that Emmanuel *is* with us, in our times of struggle and waiting. We know that God hears our lament, responds, and finds a way to break into our circumstances with hope. And that assurance, that we discover within our faith, leads us to sing praise even in dark

times. Because, as we read, “God, the Lord, is my strength.” And, as St. Paul will write so powerfully about 650 years after our text today—“If God is for us, who is against us?” If God is our strength, darkness never has the final word.

And so in this dark season of oncoming winter, embracing the vision of Habakkuk, we practice waiting, and we practice hoping. You might wonder why we have to do this year after year, every Advent season? It’s because we *need* a lot of practice to learn how to wait and hope well. It doesn’t come naturally. The great cellist, YoYo Ma, was asked why he continues to practice so hard when he’s in his 60s and already so accomplished, and he replied, “I think I’m improving”. We can also improve with practice, with practices of our faith, in waiting and in hoping. It’s dark so much of the time as we move towards December, but we practice our waiting and our hoping. We light candles on our Advent wreath, more every Sunday, so that we can see how that hope shines more brightly over the time of our waiting. God is with us, Emmanuel, in our hoping and our waiting. Amen.