

Message: "The Art of Paying Attention"

Scripture Lesson: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. ²O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted. 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. ²Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For 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. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Sometimes I see some very ugly, wrong things in our world; how about you?

Fall is here, and you know it is fall when you see leaves turning color, you feel the nip in the air, you discover there's yet another thing besides coffee and beer which can be flavored with pumpkin-spice, and you realize you're beginning to count down to Christmas by observing the merchandise in the stores (did you notice that they all but skipped Halloween? Except for the candy.....). You also know fall is here when you close up your garden and have to deal with the vegetables that didn't quite make it. You often discover this by grabbing plants that have already started to decay, as I did when I picked one of our last cucumbers from the vine, and wound up with a handful of yuck. It had already begun to rot, even as it looked sort of OK on the outside. Yes, it is natural, it is predictable, but it's also gross and smelly. It felt like an ugly, wrong thing.

Last week, I was behind one of those pickup trucks that had their own zip code - double cab, double-suspended, double expensive, and double-offensive; it was so long that it saved gas because it reached its destination sooner than a shorter vehicle would. We were waiting for the light to change; he was first in line at the light, and I was right behind. For some reason, he decided that this would be a good time to test his speed off the line - which means that he was ready to peel out as soon as he saw the green light. He did so, and instantly I discovered I was mistaken - his truck did not run on gas but diesel. I've never seen such a cloud of black smoke belch out of a vehicle for so long; the smoke was so thick I nor the cars next to me moved for several seconds because we literally couldn't see. If there was a global mechanical scale for carbon emissions, I am certain it would have moved noticeably due to what came out of that exhaust pipe. It was an ugly, wrong thing.

My wife and I walk our neighborhood several times a week; I've been noticing a flag on a house several blocks away from our street; there was writing on it, but

I but couldn't make it out very well; the wind never held it out straight. But the other day, there was a gentle breeze that had the message on the flag stand out plainly - the message said, "God, Guns, and Trump." I'm very glad the wind doesn't blow more, for that is an ugly, wrong sign. Ugly and wrong for its skewing of God's nature, as if the words "God" and "Guns" ever go together. Ugly and wrong for associating God with nationalism, as the last name on that flag is noted for doing. It is an ugly, wrong thing.

There are many ugly, wrong things in our world, aren't there?

How tempting it is to look away, to avoid, to dismiss, or otherwise not face what is wrong with the world, for there is so very much wrong! I'm tempted to never grow cucumbers again, or to stop driving for fear of entering another black cloud of exhaust, or changing our morning walk route to detour around that offensive flag. It is tempting to look away, to temper our awareness of such ugly, wrong things. Perhaps we even wonder sometimes if God is not doing this, looking away from the despair, the devastation, the violence and chaos of our world?

Habakkuk shares a different counsel with us today. This passage starts off giving a vivid, eloquent description of all the ugly, wrong things that met the eyes of the prophet. His lament could easily be our own; he says, "Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted."

You said it, Habakkuk! Destruction and violence, strife, contention, and all manner of trouble; the law dissolves into rebellion; justice fails to prevail; there is wickedness all around; so much of our world is distorted. There are so many ugly, wrong things out there, back then and today. It's very depressing!

So what do we do about all of these ugly, wrong things? Again, the counsel of Habakkuk returns our spiritual sanity to us, as we hear a voice of patient, calming wisdom in his choice of posture: He says, "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. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. 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. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith."

He's talking about vigilance, about that state of being that is proactively watchful for what is unfolding AND GOD'S TAKE ON IT; being proactively watchful to respond to what is needed yet, at the same time, prepared to await that time signaled through our faith. Being proactively watchful means to await the prompting of God rather than the prompting of humanity, knowing that God will prompt us towards humanity's need more directly and clearly than any human prompt can. In other words, THERE IS STILL A VISION. More to the point, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A VISION! A vision that God establishes, and thus cannot be removed, and will never disappear. But we can only maintain a sense of God's vision as we pay our fullest attention to reality, both the good and the bad.

Fleming Rutledge (born 1937) is an American Episcopal priest, author, and preacher. Ordained to the diaconate in 1975, she was one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. The Reverend Rutledge describes the attentiveness of our faith this way: "We are given at least a partial knowledge of God and of the darkness that opposes God. Anyone who has received even a tiny glimpse of the majesty, holiness, and righteousness of God will have an increased sense of the darkness, disorder, and malevolence that's loose in the world. These forces would swallow us up had not God set in motion his great plan to reclaim his creation."

In other words, God's vision for creation will always supercede whatever creation produces of itself, whether back in Habakkuk's time, or in our time. God's will shall be done, in God's time, in God's manner, which involves us intimately. We are invited to remain attentive to God's movement in this world and in our lives, for God constantly asks us to be a part of that vision. Our unshakable hope is to be found only in God's vision for reality.

So, no, I will not give up growing cucumbers, even though some may rot. I will not stop driving, although I will continue to seek less polluting ways of transportation (yes, I am riding the bus more, and have dusted off my bicycle). I will look at the ugly, wrong signs on flagpoles and in yards in recognition that our nation needs my attention and yours perhaps more now than ever, to speak truth to power, to speak sense to lunacy, to speak love to hate; in other words, I will vote, and strongly encourage you to do the same! I will prioritize God's timing over my own, God's manner over my own, God's desire over my own. I will seek God's presence and direction in all of it, the good and the bad, that I may be a part of what God is doing to make this world more compassionate and just. And I hope you will, too.