

“The Silence, the Answers, and the Question of God”  
September 25, 2022

Habakkuk 1:1-3, 2:1-4  
Luke 18:1-8

The prophet asks of God: “How long?” and waits for an answer.

Habakkuk, like all the prophets we have heard in recent weeks, lamented the injustice and the corruption that he saw, not just in neighboring countries but in his own land. Destruction and violence, strife and contention, laws ignored and courts in disarray—we have some sense of what Habakkuk experienced.

We, too, would ask: How long?

How long will we wait for justice as the strong devour the weak, the rich devour the poor?

How long will intolerance and bigotry plague our relationships, our city, our world?

How long will Ukraine struggle against Russia?

How long will this pandemic continue?

How long?

At some point, most of us feel like we just can’t take it anymore.

Perhaps it comes when the demands of family life, work, friendships or, yes, even the demands of the church become too great. We are worn down and people who mean much to us start causing us pain.

Or it may happen at the point where chronic physical pain or a prolonged illness becomes completely unbearable.

Sometime the pain is emotional or spiritual rather than physical. It can be caused by the death of a loved one, the grief that doesn’t seem to end, or a broken relationship.

And at times, the problems are on a much larger scale. Reports of famine, TV images of people suffering under tyrants, pictures of refugees from war or natural disaster disturb our comfortable lives. We look on, often feeling helpless, occasionally wanting to act, to respond, usually asking—ourselves, God: “How long? How long?”

We wait for an answer and encounter silence.

Maybe you remember from a college literature class that chapter from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s great novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*, titled “The Grand Inquisitor.” In

this story Christ returns to Earth during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Jesus does very little and says nothing at all.

After standing in silence before the Grand Inquisitor during his long discourse, Christ kisses the Inquisitor and, in silence, leaves into the “dark alleys of the city.”

Silence.

And a single act that is at best ambiguous.

In this vision of the Christ who comes, Dostoyevsky suggests both searing judgment and immense compassion.

“Will God not listen? Will God not save?”

In the silence, people respond to pain in various ways.

Some respond by numbing themselves so that the pain cannot be felt. One person, speaking of his brother’s abuse of prescription drugs said: “Maybe he saw so much that he simply couldn’t stand it, couldn’t bear the awful weight.”<sup>i</sup>

Some drown out the pain with various diversions. This is a material response to a spiritual problem. By surrounding ourselves with more and more things, more and more work, more and more busy activity, we can—at least for a time—avoid dealing with the grief, the difficult relationships, the tragedies that are a part of our lives.

Some people respond by interrupting the silence and crying out.

The German theologian, Dorthée Solle recalled a childhood experience when she “saw three big kids jump a small boy, throw him to the ground, and beat him up. The little kid yelled and screamed. I had a helpless feeling inside, a feeling of rage in the pit of my stomach. What could I do? They paid no attention to me since I was even littler than my classmate. So, I screamed. I screamed out of anger, out of revulsion, out of rage.”<sup>ii</sup>

When we cry out in our pain, we are beginning to pray. Human beings and human communities live with the constant reality of pain, rage, and grief that should not be denied. Indeed, this reality may help us to communicate with God.

To pray is to bring our pain before God.

When we cry out in pain, we join that long line of women and men who have addressed God in this way: the prophet Habakkuk, the writers of the psalms, Jesus of Nazareth and many others who did not turn away from injustice or despair, but faced it fully and called to God. Like them we discover—perhaps with surprise—that God is present in suffering, providing strength when we can’t take it, when we can’t make it alone.

Prayer is the way for the hurting part of our lives to be presented to God.

To pray is to bring our pain before God.

And to pray is to be persistent.

I was told once of an order of nuns whose calling was to pray for peace. Twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, this order prays for peace. When I first heard of this I thought: “Well, some good that does.” Like the rest of you I could point to war and violence throughout the world that seems unaffected by their prayers.

But as I thought further, I was compelled to say: “Well, that does some good.” What might our world be without their prayers?

Prayer is not a one-time proposition. In our own prayers, too, we can continue, persisting to cry out and not losing heart.

To pray is to persist.

Yes, to pray is also to doubt.

Many of the prayers in the Bible show us that doubt is a part of prayer:

Jesus crying, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Habakkuk pleading, “O God, how long shall I cry for your help and you will not hear? Why do you make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?”

To question God, to question God’s goodness, is not to cease to pray.

In prayer we open ourselves to hear God’s answer. But that means that we must also be open to living in God’s silence. That silence can cause us to doubt, to question the whole enterprise, to think that we might as well scrap all of this and move on to something more practical. The irony is that the more we bring our pain before God, the more we persist in prayer, the more we find ourselves confronting our doubt.

To pray is to be persistent.

To pray is to doubt.

And ultimately, to pray is to find faith.

For many years now, the poet Christian Wiman, has struggled with faith in the face of the cancer that nearly killed him and may yet do so. In one unfinished poem, he calls out to “My God my bright abyss...” In asking about the meaning of faith in these days, he arrives at the sense that faith “means no more than, and not less than, faith in life—in some tender and terrible energy that is, for those with the eyes to see it, love.”<sup>iii</sup>

The witness of the prophets, the witness of Jesus, the witness of those around us today is that God is faithful, that God will respond, God will vindicate, God will—often in ways unexpected—speak. Out of our pain, through our persistence and our doubt—in

other words, in prayer—we find our cries, our questions are honored, embraced, and loved.

A cry from a cross.

A shout at an empty tomb.

The good news that God is with us honors our troubled spirits, embraces our sinful selves, and loves our finite lives to an eternal extent beyond our imagination.

The faithfulness of God then becomes the foundation of our own faith—our own ability to trust in God and to live in good faith with one another.

We respond to God’s love with a faith that shows compassion and kindness, that feeds the hungry and welcomes the stranger, that visits those who are sick and in prison. The faith that is the bond between human beings is the faith that works as we wait for God.

In the words of the prophet: “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”

Our cries in pain, the prophet’s cry of “How long?” are answered.

There is in prayer, however, an unanswered question.

It is the question that does not come from us, but is addressed to us. It is the question that Jesus poses at the end of the parable we heard today. It’s put at the end of the parable because it’s the question that remains after all of our questions have been answered. It’s the concern that stands after our concerns have been addressed.

The concern of Jesus seems to be *us*, his followers, and what *we* say and do.

“Will he find faith on earth?”

Jesus asks this question after telling a parable about a judge who, as Jesus says, “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” This judge’s methods lead to situations known by Habakkuk: “the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.”

Some might ask just what kind of faith is Jesus talking about here? Instead of religious belief, the “faith on earth” in question might be the kind of good faith among people—the promise that can be trusted, the handshake that is binding, the covenants that we make with our leaders—that can seem so lacking in our own time. Will he find faith on earth or public officials who care only for their own comfort and well-being, research scientists who know how to manipulate data for desired outcomes, business owners who enrich themselves at the expense of people and the environment, religious leaders who are either demagogues or timid souls, unconcerned with the congregations entrusted to their care. If Christ comes looking for good faith between people, he might indeed be disappointed.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

It is an unanswered question because each of us must answer it on our own—and we must answer it as a community. So, I leave it with you—and I will take it with myself today as well. “Will faith be found on earth?”

Will faith be found? The question is ours to answer. The answer is ours to live.

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<sup>i</sup> Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*

<sup>ii</sup> Dorothee Solle, *Not Just Yes and Amen*

<sup>iii</sup> Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, pg. 36.