

The prophet Habakkuk lives in a world out of whack, a world in which the rules no longer apply. Judean violence is everywhere in pre-exilic Judah during the reign of King Jehoiakim, and Habakkuk is dumbfounded at Yahweh's silence and absence. Our reading is sort of chopped up, but early on, Habakkuk points out that the rule of law is a shambles. "Destruction and violence are before me; *lawsuits* and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails." When destruction or violence happen, the perpetrators are supposed to be stopped and penalized, but instead, the conflicts escalate, contests in which the most influential wins, rather than the most justified. So the law becomes slack: the law exists in theory, but it is not enforced, and justice never gets done.

We know this world. Medicaid is privatized, and when patients report denials of care, they are met with denials that what they experienced was real. Poor migrants seeking asylum from violence are met at our border with tear gas, as if they were armed invaders. African American men are stopped by law enforcement and must rely on their own people skills, not the law, to protect them. We know very well that our world does not reflect God's gracious purposes, and like Habakkuk, we long for assurance that this dissonance will end soon.

In Habakkuk's case, God both gave him a vision of violence and destruction yet to come *and* called forth from him a defiant statement of hope. In Habakkuk's case, God told him that the corrupt Judean society would soon be decimated and exiled by the army of the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, which was in fact what happened. The Babylonian army is a fighting machine that worships only its own strength, and Habakkuk is horrified at the idea that God would use as an instrument

this embodiment of idolatry. Isn't God undermining Godself in this way, as well as letting Judea continue to rot from within? Habakkuk asks the explicit and accusatory question: "Why do you look upon the treacherous ones, and why are you silent when a wicked man swallows a man more righteous than he?"

What follows is fairly dense Hebrew Bible prose, but the gist of it, I think, is that Habakkuk himself is no angel, and that it is precisely the wickedness of the Judeans that makes them deserve an enemy like the Babylonians. There are no innocent parties in this place. So that's kind of chilling, and it seems to shut up Habakkuk for a few minutes, but soon enough he's back at it, haranguing God to act, *even though* he is terrified of what God's action will bring. Finally Habakkuk is granted a theophany, a revelation of God, which affirms both his fear and his faith. He says to God, "In our own time revive [your work]; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy." And he ends with the striking, paradoxical declaration that although the fig tree doesn't blossom and there is no fruit on the vines, yet he will rejoice in the Lord. In other words, although there is no indication of sustenance beyond today, no evidence of any potential or future, he will nevertheless exult in God. Staring into the darkness, he will rejoice.

This confrontation with the abyss reminds me of something Patti said when we were brainstorming about Advent. She was talking about what happens when a client realizes something true that they not only didn't know but didn't want to be true. They are afraid and they want a way out. But Patti's response to "This feels awful" is "I know, and I'm so excited." Because the truth, when we stop denying it, sets us free. Paying attention to what we did not want to know is the first step in

finding out what we must do to live. Terrifying and unasked-for, honesty is the way of transformation.

I have only a dim memory of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, but that is the life lesson I took away from that book. The young heroine, Dorothea, romantic and thwarted in her own intellectual ambitions, marries an older man whom she fancies to be a great scholar, to whom she aspires to be a helpmate in his research.

Ultimately she must face the fact that her husband is just a plodding pedant, not engaged in a work of brilliant intellect, and not endowed with more than average wisdom or insight. True happiness is not to be found in marriage to a fantasy, and she has to face her self-deception before she can find that true happiness.

Or, let's be less Victorian and more justice-minded. In his poem "Tired," Langston Hughes wrote,

I'm so tired of waiting
Aren't you,
For the world to become good
And beautiful and kind?
Let us take a knife
And cut the world in two -
And see what worms are eating
At the rind.

Hughes imagines the world as a piece of rotten fruit, and suggests a dramatic act—knifing the fruit open—to lay bare what is corrupting it. The worms have been eating in the dark while Hughes waited for the fruit to become whole and healthy. The beginning of the end of the corruption happens when sunlight falls on those secretive, silent parasites.

All of these are ways to talk about the transformative power of honesty. If I hadn't gotten snowed by the dire weather forecast last week, I would have preached

about the need for white people to pay more attention to what people of color say about racism. Sometimes our attention is so selective that we literally don't take in the important truths about the fruit-eating worms we can control. We don't mean to be destructive or racist or anything at all harmful, but we don't know what we don't know until we are curious enough about the truth to listen carefully. Turns out there *are* worms that we can stop from further corrupting our world. Turns out there's more to see than what's visible from where I stand.

Honesty teaches us how we really need to be in the world we are in as it is. Living by faith in light of life's perplexities encompasses being honest with God about our perplexity. One does not simply have mature faith, such that one knows how to be in this world and recognize one's role in both perpetuating and fighting evil. On the contrary, the book of Habakkuk affirms that true faith in God, the ability to believe the vision in spite of the evidence, is only the product of deep searching characterized by crying out, questioning, challenging, being angry with, listening, and fearing, i.e., dialogue with God and with one another.ⁱ

Faithful God, you proved your faithfulness to your people when they cried out to you in distress. Be present in our distress, and show us how to be faithful to you in the midst of suffering. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ

ⁱ Habakkuk's Dialogue with Faithful Yahweh: A Transforming Experience R. David Moseman Baylor