

How Long?

Have you ever made the mistake of shopping at Costco or BJ's on a weekend? You may only have a couple items in your basket, and you make the rounds through only the aisles you absolutely need to travel, but then you get to the checkout lanes and you see 7 or 8 customers with loaded baskets ahead of you in line. And although all the registers are running, the line is just as long at each of them. I see you know what I mean.

How well do you wait for your turn? I've seen people who've just given up, left their carts and walked out the door. Others who may only have this one chance in the week to shop stay in line – with varying amounts of patience – and wait, and wait, and wait. I've found a good use for my time in these situations. While I wait in line for my turn I run through my list of names of people and situations on my prayer list. By the time I get to the register, then, I'm in a pretty good frame of mind to cheerfully greet the harried cashier. My time in prayer helps me remember that that store worker will be at the register for several hours that day, and I can make my few minutes there a little easier with a word of encouragement or praise.

Try this prayerful practice the next time you're stuck in traffic, behind a line of cars at the gas station, in the doctor's waiting room, or waiting interminably for something to just be over with.

In our reading from Habakkuk this morning, we see that the prophet found time spent in prayer to be helpful. The author does not hesitate to plead his case, not only on his own behalf but on behalf of the people of his nation. He is living at a terrible time in the history of the Holy Land. Not long before, the mighty Assyrian army destroyed one city after another, brutally killing people wherever they charged in. And we know that not long after Habakkuk was written, the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar would three times attack Jerusalem, taking the leaders and skilled citizens into exile. In fact, in 587 BCE, the city of Jerusalem and Solomon's beautiful temple would be destroyed. Violence was all around.

This is the situation into which Habakkuk is called to minister to his people. The job of a prophet is often a thankless one. He or she carries the burden of the people to God and proclaims God's response to them. Often, as in this case, God's answer is one the people do not want to hear.

So, even as the prophet cries out “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” he hopes with all his heart that the violence surrounding God’s people will end. In the midst of this nightmare, the only thing the prophet can do is to help his people voice their pain, to cry over the anguish they are facing each day. “Lord, how long? Lord, help me...”

Habakkuk has in the past been deemed a dangerous book. In 1940, in a church newspaper in Basel, Switzerland, Ulrike Bail published a column under the title: “Word on the (Current) Situation” that included an excerpt from Habakkuk. The military censors banned the newspaper because they viewed this text as a critique of the Nazi regime of the time. See, Habakkuk reminds believers centuries later how important it is to keep on believing in a God that will bring deliverance. This unflinching belief in God’s ability to make an end to violence is precisely the reason why the prophet’s words were banned in Nazi Germany – the idea that God will end unjust power was considered too dangerous to be tolerated.

From our future vantage point, we know that the violence and terror in Habakkuk’s world would continue for a long time. His prophetic writing is filled with accounts of mistreatment, death and destruction. But typical to the prophetic voice in the Old Testament, violence and injustice do not have the last word.

Still, when God’s answer comes, it is not what one would have liked to hear. God says, “Wait. Be patient. Deliverance is coming but you will have to wait.” Well, crumb! God’s response challenges all the easy answers or quick fixes that we humans crave. In Israel’s history, the prophet’s message would be followed by many more years of violence and injustice. Things would get much worse before they would become better. However, in the middle of the direst of circumstances, we see how the prophet clings to God’s faithfulness and love.

From Habakkuk’s writing and from our knowledge of more recent worldwide history, we know that situations of violence can last many years and even decades. Sometimes, even in our personal lives we may find ourselves in a situation of pain and suffering that seems to go on without end. These are the times, believers must be patient. We are not to give up, and we are not to be silent.

Look at how the prophet kept the faith. His beautiful confession of faith acknowledges the ongoing pain and injustice in his world, the absence of

signs from God that the long period of waiting is over. And yet the wonderful thing about Habakkuk's confession is that this believer can still say, I believe in a God that gives me strength – in the MIDDLE of the violence, in the MIDDLE of the depravity.

Move forward now six hundred years from the time of Habakkuk and the destruction of the nation of Israel. Walk along the paths of the Holy Land with Jesus and his disciples. In our snippet from Matthew's Gospel we hear that even Jesus – the hope of the nations, the fulfillment of prophecy – feels overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He asks Peter, James and John to stand with him as he prays. There in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus will acknowledge his fear and feelings of being unprepared for what is about to happen. He will lift his lament to God, his father, and seek the strength he needs to meet the test that is to come.

In this season of Advent, when we are waiting for the coming again of our savior, it's good for us to hear these difficult texts from our sacred scriptures. As we light our Advent wreath one candle at a time, we wait for that perfect light to come. In the middle of this world's challenges, it's good for us to be reminded of our ancestors-in-faith who waited through greater trials than ours, who waited eagerly for an answer to prayer that would remove pain and death from their daily lives.

You and I know how God answered the longing of the nations. We know that when the time was just right for God's purposes, Jesus walked among us – was one of us – and in his life, death and resurrection fulfilled the prophecy of Habakkuk and all the other prophets of old in a way that no mere human could accomplish. Jesus, the baby sleeping in a manger, the boy in the temple teaching the priests, the healer of the ill and provider for all in need, Jesus was the answer to Habakkuk's prayer. He is the answer to prayer wherever pain and injustice reign. He is with the Bush family as they mourn. He is with the children who are separated from their parents in detention camps. He is with the Sudanese people as their dictator orders genocide. He is with the Syrians who long to return to their ancestral homes. Wherever pain and injustice reign, Jesus is there to provide strength and peace and hope.

In our prayers let us lift up all who suffer. In our actions let us bring comfort and peace. And in the name of Jesus, let there be eternal hope. Amen