

"HOW LONG, O LORD?"

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Luke 4:16-21 Romans 8:18- 28, 35-39

November 4, 2018

York Center Church of the Brethren

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My friend, Ricky, and I met for lunch this week. He is Rabbi Ricky Kamil, assistant Rabbi at Congregation Etz Chaim. Did you know that in Hebrew "Etz Chaim" means "Tree of Life?"

I called him after the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg and invited him to lunch. I told him, "I can't stop Anti-Semitism, but I can feed you." So there we sat, at our favorite Middle Eastern restaurant, over lentil soup, hummus, and falafels, and we asked, "How long, O Lord?"

Building security is nothing new for my friend. They have feared intrusions into their synagogue for a long time and have added many security measures that we wouldn't even think about. Sadly, the threat of violence is nothing new for Jewish leaders. He and I talked about why people hate Jews. Neither of us can really understand it. He talked about the connections between his congregation and those who were murdered. He said they call it "Jewish Geography." I compared it to the "Brethren Name Game."

The sister of brothers Cecil and David Rosenthal is a member of his congregation. The brothers have attended Etz Chaim on a number of occasions. At the Shabbat service Friday evening at Etz Chaim, Cecil and David's two teenaged nieces shared a loving and moving tribute to their uncles who were both mentally disabled. How long, O Lord?

At that same Shabbat service we applauded a young Muslim man who was the leader in organizing a Muslim relief agency in collecting donations to pay for the funerals of their Jewish neighbors. They have raised over \$200,000. A sign of hope and light.

Did you know there is an election this week? I don't know about you but I am so fed up with the negative ads. They tell us nothing about the person who is running for office- but they make sure we know that if we vote for their opponent we will usher in the end of the world and the United States will be overrun by zombies- or at least socialists. Cable news networks try to outdo each other with sensationalism. People are spewing hate speech like they're the ones who invented it. So-called "religious" people denounce those of other faiths and beliefs. Christians beat each

other up with the language of scripture. For God's sake, what in the world has happened to us? How long, O Lord?

Why all the anger? Why all the hopelessness? Why all the hatred? Why all the fear? We seem to be suffocating in a tomb of fear. A culture of fear breeds intolerance and suspicion of those not like us. Fearful people do terrible things. They are easily manipulated, tend to blame others, see things in a negative light, and often strike out at people they do not like or understand.

The gunman walked into the Tree of Life Synagogue shouting that he wanted to "Kill Jews." The doctor who saved his life after he was shot by police is a Jew. Last week another heavily armed white man tried to enter an African American church building but the door was locked. Instead he went to a nearby grocery store and murdered a black man and a black woman, saying he wanted to kill black people. How in the world do we allow this to happen in the United States?

How long, O Lord?

Fear is used as a weapon by politicians, preachers, business people, and the entertainment industry. Fear sells. When people can entice us to be afraid of the wrong things then we become paralyzed and don't spend our time working on the right things. There is no doubt that we are living in hard times. But then again, someone in our country has always lived in hard times. I doubt that anyone but some straight, rich, white men would ever say that there was a time when America was actually great.

People of color, women, the disabled, the poor have struggled and bled for the right to be considered a citizen or even a human being. "How long, O Lord?"

How long will corporate corruption bankrupt middle class and poor families while the CEO's walk away with millions? How long will we demonize people seeking safety and refuge in our country while we rip their children out of their arms? How long will we allow polluters to ruin our air and water while they are protected by politicians who enact legislation just for them? We feel helpless and hopeless. How long, O Lord?

Yes, there are many reasons to be worried and afraid in these days. But if we give in to our fear then we will accomplish nothing. Take it from Habakkuk. Ever heard of him? This is what Eugene Peterson has to say about this prophet in his introduction to the book of Habakkuk in THE MESSAGE.

"Living by faith is a bewildering venture. We rarely know what's coming next, and not many things turn out as we anticipate. It is natural to assume that since I am God's chosen and beloved, I will get favorable treatment from the God who favors me so extravagantly. It is not unreasonable to expect that from the time I become God's follower, I will be exempt from dead ends, muddy detours, and cruel treatment from the travelers I meet who are walking in the other direction. That God-followers don't get preferential treatment in life always comes as a surprise.

But it's also a surprise to find that there are a few men and women within the Bible who show up alongside us at such moments. The prophet Habakkuk is one of them, and a most welcome companion he is. Most prophets, most of the time, speak God's Word to us. They are preachers calling us to listen to God's words of judgment and salvation, confrontation and comfort. They face us with God as God is, not as we imagine God to be. Most prophets are in-your-face assertive, not given to tact, not diplomatic, as they insist that we pay attention to God. But Habakkuk speaks our word to God. He gives voice to our bewilderment, articulates our puzzled attempts to make sense of things, faces God with our disappointment with God. He insists that God pay attention to us, he insists with a prophet's characteristic no-nonsense bluntness.

Habakkuk started out exactly where we start out with our puzzled complaints and God-accusations, but he didn't stay there. He ended up in a world, along with us, where every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good."

In chapter one, Habakkuk cries out to God, "How long, O God? How long will you allow these terrible things to happen without doing anything? Where are you? Do you even care?"

Good for you, Habakkuk- telling it like it is. Demanding answers from God! What makes his complaint even worse is that he wasn't ranting about an outside enemy, he was complaining about the injustice he saw within the Jewish community. He was calling out his own religious and political leaders who perverted justice and ignore God's teachings.

After voicing his lament and making his argument to God Habakkuk makes a declaration of faith in God and voices his hope as he waits for the expected response. "I will take my stand at the highest place in the city and scan the horizon, watching and waiting for God's reply." Habakkuk plants himself squarely where he thinks God can see him and he waits.

Here is the thing about lament. You can't voice your complaints to a God you don't believe in; a God you don't believe will listen to you. Lament is not an act of

faithlessness, it is an act of great faith. Arguing with God presupposes that God is listening and actually gives a darn about what you think. Habakkuk freely expresses his outrage and his fear to the God he believes is faithful and desires justice. If he believed in an evil and vindictive God, he probably wouldn't even bother to raise the question. But he knows, **from past experience**, that God is faithful and so this is what he is demanding to see from God.

People of faith go through times of great intimacy with God and times of great desolation. In those times of absence, Habakkuk counsels us to wait with patience, to climb the highest tower and keep our eyes and ears open because the answer will come. And it did. *"Then the Lord answered me and said, 'There is still a vision for the appointed time, it speaks of the end and it does not lie. If it seems slow in coming, don't worry, it will come right on time.'"*

In the movie, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel," the idealistic young man who is the manager of a decrepit hotel tells his complaining guests over and over again. *"In the end all will be right. If things are not yet right, then it is not the end."*

And I believe that is where we stand as followers of Jesus Christ. Christians always walk on the edge of transformation. We are always being called to something new. We know the world is not yet the way God intended, but we walk with the One who was God's new thing. No one expected Jesus- especially when he was born in a stable and grew up in a poor family of carpenters. When he preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah, he had the audacity to tell his neighbors and friends that the scripture was being fulfilled right then and there- by him.

The people he grew up with responded by trying to throw him off of a cliff.

And honestly, I think many Christians are still trying to get rid of him. Or we are at least trying to remake him into our own image.

In his book, A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY, Brian McLaren quotes two of his critics. One said McLaren wants to *"recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with lots of product in his hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes."*

And this critic's view of Jesus? He wrote, *"In Revelation, Jesus is a prize-fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in his hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. This is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up."* (1)

Another critic took issue with McLaren's suggestion that Jesus calls for social justice. This critic said, *"The only reason Jesus came was to save people from hell... Jesus had no social agenda... He didn't come to eliminate poverty or slavery or fix something in somebody's life for the little moment they live on this earth."* (2)

The only response I have to these ridiculous statements is this: have they even read Bible?

Jesus couldn't make his identity and purpose any clearer when he read and claimed the words from the prophet Isaiah-

"God's Spirit is upon me; God's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind

To set the burdened and battered free. To announce, "This is God's year to act!"
(*The MESSAGE*)

I can understand why some people want to shove Jesus off of a cliff. He represents everything they despise- hope, charity, generosity, grace, wisdom, acceptance, forgiveness, welcome, and mostly, love. Jesus isn't great for the bottom line. And he doesn't condone the misuse of power or wealth. He is pretty threatening to those who want to hold tightly to their status and their bank account at the expense of others. And he calls for us to follow his example.

I am feeling exhausted these days- I am still trying to regain my strength after a long and difficult recovery from knee replacement surgery.

I am exhausted from trying to maintain my belief in our democracy. I am exhausted by the constant barrage of hate speech by politicians and acts of violence that go unchallenged by those in power. Some days I wonder if it is worth trying to change the way things are. Some days I feel hopeless. How long, O Lord?

And then I remember the words of Sikh activist Valarie Kaur (I keep them on my desk): *"What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb- what if it is the darkness of the womb?"*

What if this time of struggle isn't a sign of the end—what if it the sign of a glorious new beginning?

And those wise words lead me to the New Testament book of Romans. Once again, thank you to Eugene Peterson and his translation, *THE MESSAGE*.

"I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Every-thing in creation is being more or less held back.

God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting.

We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. The Spirit does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. The Spirit knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good. So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing God's self to the worst by sending the Son, is there anything else God wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.

*None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—**absolutely nothing** can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus Christ has embraced us."*

How long, O Lord?

As long as it takes.

In the meantime my prayer is this: God, allow us to be the change you wish to see in your precious, precious world.

Amen.

END NOTES:

- *A NEW KIND OF CHRISTIANITY, Brian D. McLaren, Harper One, 2010. P. 120.*
- *P. 127.*