

## “Write the Vision”

### Habakkuk 1:1-13, 2:1-4

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul’s, Henderson, June 19, 2016 following Orlando*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

As I have already told you, I very much like to use the assigned portion of the Gospels as my main focus when I to step into this desk. But this past Tuesday, at the candlelight vigil for victims of the Orlando shooting down the street at Zion UCC, one of the readings set the tone for my thoughts this week, and I left this morning’s readings for another time.

I got to the service Tuesday at the very last minute. I didn’t really plan to be one of the last ones to squeeze into the back of the church, but it was Tuesday evening, and Saints, Sinners and Cynics was sharing the dining room at Rookies with a group of Democratic women, so the service was slower even than the usual Tuesday evening, and the catfish, when it finally came with barely enough time to eat, was very good, but a little too hot to eat too quickly.

I got to the UCC at the very last minute, and excused myself as I squeezed through the standing-room-only crowd that was actually standing at the back of the church, to find one last space, behind the TV camera tripods, where someone had stuffed a rocking chair so far back into the corner that it was rocked completely forward. I couldn’t really see the front of the church from that precarious perch, but I was keenly aware that the service was not for me, but for members of the very community that had been attacked so brutally, the community that has so often been excluded, if not actually driven out, from places like this one, the very sanctuaries where they *might* have found strength and comfort in their times of need.

As the service began, a reader came forward and announced a reading from the book of the prophet, Habakkuk.

“How long will I cry to you ‘Violence!’” Habakkuk said, and the reader read, “and you will not save?” “How long will you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?” “How long, oh Lord, how long?”

“How long will the law be slack, and justice never prevail?” “How long will you be silent, oh Lord, while the wicked *swallow* the righteous?” “How long, oh Lord, will judgement be perverted?” “How long, oh Lord, how long?”

The reader concluded, but the outrage and the anger and the betrayal in the room seemed to only have begun.

“How long will war and famine and pestilence claim the lives of the innocent?” “How long will what is right be determined by the best sound bite?” “How long will Jews and Muslims and Christians of one branch or another, war with each other – in the name of the one God Almighty?” “How long will violence be our news and perversion our entertainment?” “How long will love be hanging from the gallows, and how long will wrong be seated on the throne?” “How long, oh Lord, how long?”

“How *long* violence?” “How *long* oppression?” “How *long* injustice?” “How *long*, oh Lord, how long?”

The service continued with another reading or two, several speakers, a handful of prayers, and what I remember being a comforting, encouraging, and challenging sermon from Pastor Coons. I *heard* it all, and I appreciated it, but at least a part of my mind was in a different place. From my perch in the corner, as soon as that first reader concluded her reading and returned to her seat, while the Prophet’s complaint was still ringing in my ears and in the minds and hearts of pretty much everyone in the place, I said to myself, “Wait. That’s not where that passage ends.”

You see, when he was finished railing at God for the brokenness of the world, Habakkuk climbed his watchtower to wait, he said, to hear whether the Lord would *answer* his cry of complaint. The reader at Tuesday's service didn't go on to hear God's answer to the Prophet. But I knew what probably most of the people in the room didn't particularly *want* to know at that moment. I knew that the Prophet's lament was *not* where that passage ends. The Lord did *indeed* answer Habakkuk. It just wasn't the answer that the Prophet *wanted* to hear.

"How long, oh Lord, how long?" he demanded, and we demand still. And the Lord's answer comes not with the thundering hooves of a liberating army beating down upon our enemies, not with white robed throngs descending on the clouds to lead the faithful to heavenly bliss, not with a mighty wind or the blast of trumpets. God's answer came to Habakkuk, and comes to us still – not with an answer or an apology, but with a *command*: "Write the vision."

"How *long* the loss of fifty lives lost in one night?" we had come to demand Tuesday evening. How long the forty-four killed in this country the *next* day, and the forty-four the next day, and the forty-four the next? How long the fifteen *hundred* murdered in this world, *every single* day, day after day after day? How long, oh Lord, how long?

"Write the vision."

How long Uganda, and Somalia, and Syria? How long holocaust, and apartheid, and genocide? How long Wounded Knee, and Stonewall, and Ferguson? How long Newtown, and Charleston, and Orlando? How long, oh Lord, how long?

"Write the vision."

How long the complacency and indifference of our silence? How long the contempt and hatred of our rage? How long, oh Lord, how long?

"Write the vision!"

Don't you see? *We have* such a vision. We who are *Christ's* have been *given* a vision from God's own hand. We have a vision written on our hearts in water and in fire. *We have* a vision.

We have been given a vision that calls us to worship the creator of heaven and earth. We have been given a vision of the Son of God willing to suffer and die for *our* faults. We have been given a vision of that same Christ risen as the victor even over death. We have been given a vision of a God of such love that he offers himself to us time after time after time again. *We have* a vision.

We have seen him in the bread and the wine. We have heard him in words of comfort and peace and forgiveness and inclusion. We have felt him in our hearts, in our lives, in our whole being. *We have* a vision.

As sinners whose sins have been forgiven, we have a vision. As servants of the Most High God of everything that is, we have a vision. As people whose lives have been touched, as people whose lives have been changed, as people whose lives have been utterly *transformed*, *we have* a vision!

But unless that message is pronounced, unless that promise is made plain, unless that vision is written clear, hopelessness and despair can overcome, and hope can die unborn.

When I was in seminary, I had the privilege of doing an internship at the National Institutes of Health, in Washington. One of the patients I was working with was a young boy of twelve, named Tommy. Tommy had a brain tumor that was inoperable. But NIH was experimenting with ways of using genetically altered virus to attack the cells in such tumors. As I grew to know Tommy and his family, I was impressed with their enthusiasm and joy of life as they traveled back and forth from their home in Denver for the various phases of the treatment. Other people in the study were showing remarkable improvement, and Tommy and his family held the hope that he might one day be able to return to the life he had had before this thing had begun growing inside him. Tommy was the very epitome of twelve-year-old-boy. He was full of life, at times full of the dickens, and probably the best Nintendo player I have ever met.

I was asked to be with Tommy and his family the day that the doctors brought the news that his tumor had *not* showed the expected signs of improvement, that it had, in fact, begun to grow more quickly. I stayed with them most of that day, helping them arrange for transportation to the airport, for the flight itself, for relatives to meet them when they got to Denver. Through it all, Tommy stared out the fifth floor window, saying nothing – responding to direct questions with a nod or a shake of his head.

When it was time for me to catch my carpool out of the city, I went over to Tommy and took hold of his hand. Tommy looked at me with eyes I had never seen before. There were no tears, and there was no spark. There was no hope. I said a prayer and I said good-bye – and Tommy nodded.

When I got to the hospital the next day, I asked at the nurses' station if Tommy and his family had gotten off as planned and the nurse confirmed that they had. But as I began to walk down the hall, she called after me. Tommy had not made it all the way home. Somewhere between Washington and Denver, somewhere on his way home, Tommy had gone to sleep, and died. I didn't say so to the nurse, but I knew that Tommy had *really* died in his fifth floor hospital room the day before.

Without hope, the spirit withers. Without hope, life becomes meaningless. "Without a *vision*," *another* prophet declared, "without a vision, the people perish."

While they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept, God commanded Habakkuk to remind the exiled children of Israel that desolation is never God's final word. "Write the vision!" he commanded. In our own time of defeated dreams and broken promises, God calls on the people of God to proclaim that *God's* promises endure. "Write the vision!" In the depths of a world of sometimes seeming hopelessness, God requires of those of us that are his, to declare that our God is, and ever *remains*, a God of hope. "Write the vision!"

To be sure, there is work that we can do, there is work that we should do, there is work that we *must* do together to bring comfort and peace to those most in need of both. But our *main* mission is today, as it always *has* been, with our words, and with our hands, and with our hearts, our mission is to write the vision that God has *ever* had for the healing of the brokenness we have created from the goodness of his creation, to announce the coming of the very Kingdom of God. Our mission as the Church, our mission as children of the Most High, is to write *his* vision.

Write the vision large, the Prophet finally declares at the *actual* conclusion of Tuesday's Word of the Lord, write the vision large, for those who are running far and fast and all too often in the opposite direction, write the vision that life is *always* stronger than death.

Write the vision bold, for a world that is nearly too blinded by its own sin and selfish pride to perceive it, write the vision that truth is *always* stronger than the lies we so often tell each other, than the lies we *too* often tell *ourselves*.

Write the vision plain, for a world that too often hardens its heart *against* hope, for a world that too often has concluded that there *is* no hope, write the vision that love is *always* stronger than hate, that *love* is always stronger than hate, that love is always, always, *always* stronger than hate.

Write the vision!