

December 2, 2018
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-4; 3:[3b-6], 17-19
First Sunday of Advent

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“The Lord is my strength”

Habakkuk, can you pronounce it right, say it with me, Habakkuk, yes, is one of those dangerous, subversive texts in the Bible. That might sound strange. The Bible as a dangerous text? Of course, we know that over the course of Christian history the Bible has often been used to support the ideology of the status quo, justifying the power or rule of this or that political establishment. If you have been participating in our adult education class this fall led by Kristi Zabriskie and John Stoesz, which is exploring the so-called “Doctrine of Discovery,” that old churchly doctrine that condoned the colonial theft of indigeneous land in the Americas, you have seen how the Bible can become an extremely dangerous text when taken-up by the hands of imperial power. But the Bible has also been used by people in struggle, people without a claim to any earthly or churchly power, people who daily resist, in ordinary and extraordinary ways, the machinations of political power, ideology, and violence. And the prophetic literature of the Hebrew scriptures, what we usually call the Old Testament, has often been a key resource, a spiritual wellspring, for such resistance.

When the Bible is taken up in this way for ordinary life among ordinary people, then we can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work, breathing the life of God into the written word of the Bible, so that it comes to bear witness to the living and liberating Word of God. It is quite remarkable, to me, to see this happen, for in a sense, we might say that the Spirit *transforms* the Bible from an old letter to a dynamic, creative, and living Word. What we see when we see the Spirit at work in this way is no longer a dusty, old ancient text with some decent teachings and ideas and bits of practical wisdom for life, but a text that is enlivened and illuminated anew, a living text, what prophets and preachers call *the Word*, a text that is made to bear witness to the God who creates and sustains the people of God in hope even in the darkest of nights, and who promises to deliver people from the depths of human suffering and oppression, who promises to raise people from the dead, even from the depths of hell. And this is when the Bible becomes dangerous, in a subversive sense, for it is here that the Spirit, we might say, *wrests* the text out of the hands of the wealthy and powerful and satiated and becomes a free gift to the poor and the weak and those who *thirst* for righteousness, *thirst* for justice, *thirst* for the coming a new world.

For example, I realized just the other day that our passage from last Sunday from the book of Jeremiah (it reads, if you will recall, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. . . . Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?”) was the same text that the German theologian, Ernst Käsemann chose to preach on on November 15, 1934, the Day of Repentance and Prayer in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, in the midst of Nazi rule. Along with fellow clergy and friends from the

Confessing Church, that group of Christians who resisted the Nazi regime in Germany, at risk of arrest and with over fifty policemen surrounding the building, Käsemann publicly dismissed, before the altar, forty-five members of the *Deutsche Christen* (Nazi-supporting Christians) from membership in his congregation and replaced them with members of the Confessing Church. He called their names out one by one and one in what became, really, a kind of performative commentary on this passage in Jeremiah. Under Nazi-influence, the church, for Käsemann, had become a den of robbers. The Bible here is taken up in a way that subverts the violence that is present not only *within* the world, but *within* the church itself.

A few years later, in 1937, after seven hundred evangelical pastors had been imprisoned by the Nazis, Käsemann preached another provocative sermon at a service of intercession, this time he used a text from the prophet Isaiah (“O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone” Isa 26:13). In the sermon, Käsemann spoke out against the many voices pressuring the Protestant church to throw out the Old Testament, the writings of the apostle Paul, and even the Bible as a whole in the name of the supremacy of Germany and the Aryan Jesus. Käsemann was reported for treachery, and the following day, the Gestapo came and got him. He spent the next month in jail where he completed a commentary on The Letter to the Hebrews, subsequently published with the title, *The Wandering People of God*, which he would later describe as a commentary on the struggle of the Confessing Church. Marcia and I had an opportunity to visit the church where Käsemann pastored on a trip to Germany a few summers ago, since I had been writing my dissertation on his work at the time. The pastor of the church guided us up the dusty, rickety stairs of the church bell tower. When we arrived at the top, we came to the massive bell and the passage from Isaiah, the prophet, was engraved on it.

Now the book of Habakkuk may be less well-known to us than Jeremiah and Isaiah, but it too has been taken up by people in struggle, people in resistance. In July 1940, a church newspaper in the city of Basel was censored by the Swiss military censor because a passage from Habakkuk was printed in a column under the heading “Word on the (Current) Situation.” The military censors concluded that such a text could no longer be read as “neutral,” given the political context. An ancient text from the Bible, about which we know very little as to its historical context or place, had all of a sudden taken on a profoundly contemporary significance, coming to function as a piece of resistance literature against the National Socialist terror regime. So, too, Habakkuk became an important source of inspiration for the South African theologian Allan Boesak during apartheid, containing as it does a hope for God’s promise of deliverance of the people from injustice and oppression.

Our lectionary text for today consists of three short pericopes from this fascinating piece of prophetic literature. While not much is known about the book or its author, it is clear that Habakkuk was written during a time of intense trauma and violence in Israel’s history. Indeed, much of the Hebrew scriptures are written in this context, containing stories and sagas, prophetic judgments and laments,

and hope for a future no longer defined by imperial violence, captivity, and exile. The Hebrew scriptures tell a history, a history of a people's subjection to imperial violence and of a people who saw in the activity of their God a source of sustaining hope to continue their struggle against such violence. In the opening verses of the book, we see the prophet looking around, overwhelmed by all the violence all around him. In verse 3, the prophet calls upon God; he questions God about why God would tolerate such evil and such injustice. Does God not see the injustice, the oppression, the strife and terror that fills the earth? It is this context of violence and injustice that we are to read the prophet's lament: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" In the midst of the darkness that surrounds him and his people at every point, the prophet becomes a voice for the pain of the people, echoing themes found in the Psalms of lament as well as the book of Lamentations, "Lord, how long? Lord, help me . . ." The very name of the prophet, Habakkuk, possibly derived from the Hebrew word "to embrace," is suggestive of this important point: that the prophet shares in the suffering of his people, embracing their suffering as his own, taking their pain into his outstretched arms, and brings all of it as a plea before God. Some scholars have suggested that the name, Habakkuk might also be derived from an Assyrian garden plant (*hambauku*), which was possibly used as a herbal curative plant. With these etymologies in mind along with the message of the prophet, we might think of Habakkuk as one who both embraces the suffering his people and one who seeks after their healing. And perhaps it is precisely this desire for healing that creates in Habakkuk such a strong identification with his people. Habakkuk has been touched by love over the well-being of his people that he simply cannot take his eyes away from the injustice that he sees all around him.

We tend to think of Advent as a celebratory time, a time preparing us for what we already know will come, the birth of the Christ-child. And while we may sing some Christmas carols over the course of the month, we should keep in mind that the season of Advent is not really about this. Advent begins in the dark, and it is oriented toward the *present darkness of the world* in which we live, a darkness articulated so well by the prophet Habakkuk. Advent is not so much the season that prepares for the *birth* of Christ, it is the season that prepares for the *second coming* of Christ. Advent may better be understood as that season that sets us *within or between* the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, in that dark place of Holy Saturday in which God feels so absent from life. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?" This is not usually what we associate with the "Christmas spirit!" But it is the world in which we live and it is in this world that Habakkuk becomes a *living* Word of lament joining in the laments of people in struggle all over the world, joining in the lament of the Caravan at the border whose children have been tear gassed, "How Lord, how long?"

With Habakkuk, Advent begins in the dark. But with Habakkuk, Advent does not rest content in the dark. The lament of Habakkuk does not lead to despair nor is rooted in despair, but as with so many of the other prophetic voices in the Old Testament, Habakkuk leads out onto a prayer rooted in a spirit of hope, for healing, for the deliverance of the people of God from violence and oppression. And so in

chapter 2:1-4 we see the prophet standing on the watch tower, waiting for the Lord to answer. God's answer comes to him, but it is not a very comforting message: "Wait. Be patient. Deliverance is coming but you will have to wait." What a difficult message to hear for a people in struggle: "wait. Be patient." While God promises deliverance, God also seems to challenge the idea that there will be a quick and easy resolution to the violence that surrounds the people. And yet, Habakkuk continues to pray: "O Lord, I have heard your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy" (3:1). Habakkuk, like the Central American families arriving at the border, continues to persist in hope, even in the dark, even when the odds are stacked against them: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights." Persistent and patient hope from one who does not hide from the pain and suffering of his people, but embraces them in love, cries out to God on their behalf, and hopes against hope for a new arrangement of things, for a new world, even in the darkest of nights. We begin this Advent season awake, eyes wide open to the realities of injustice all around us, our lives outstretched in patient love to embrace those who suffer unjustly. We make time for lament, we make time for prayer, prayers of complaint and pleading to God. We begin this Advent situated firmly in the realities of the injustices of our world, yet we persist in hope for the second coming Christ, living by faith, empowered by the Spirit of the liberating One who promises to deliver God's people from bondage and lead them on the road to freedom. What a beautiful image of Advent faith!: *The Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.*