

One Candle, One Step

This morning's text comes from the prophet Habakkuk who lived and wrote in the midst of Judah's darkest moments. The northern kingdom was defeated long ago. The southern kingdom manages to fend off enemies for a while longer, but the Babylonians and their king Nebuchadnezzar ultimately capture and destroy Jerusalem in 597 BCE. In the wake of this defeat, the Babylonians begin deporting many of Jerusalem's leaders. The people are undermined and defeated at every turn. Their city lies in ruins and their leadership is scattered. It is in this moment that Habakkuk speaks, taking his lament and that of the people directly to God. [Habakkuk 1 and 2, selected verses]

My friend Caroline is a brilliant professor at the University of Southern California. She lives in Malibu...or she did until November 9. On that day she and her family evacuated to escape the wildfires raging all around them. Before the fire she would share pictures of the beauty she knew she was privileged to live in and around—glorious sunsets, ripe fruit from trees in her own backyard, seagulls perched without a care in the sand. Sometime before Thanksgiving she posted a photo taken from her own patio. It showed the mayor of Malibu, who also happens to be a firefighter looking into a sea of flames as he and the other firefighters fought off the determined inferno. They managed to save Caroline's house as they attempted to draw a line that the fire could not pass. They were unable to save much else. As you know, entire neighborhoods and towns lie in ruins. Caroline's son has been out of school since November 9 and probably won't go back until December 11. Many of his friends have scattered, if they have somewhere to go. She reminded me that while some celebrities live nearby, the community is largely made up of regular people who are teachers, artists, business owners, therapists, fire fighters, and struggling musicians, regular people who are unsure how they will rebuild, how they will begin again.¹

That's how I imagine Habakkuk's community, too. The landscape has been utterly changed by endless wars. Many of the elite have been exiled, and the regular people remain to pick up the pieces and figure out a

¹ This story is shared with Caroline's permission.

way forward. This story is not a new one, of course. It happens time and again. In the wake of wildfires and wars, hurricanes and plane crashes; it happens in the wake of pink slips and divorce papers, diagnoses and rejection letters; it comes in the wake of too many words that cannot be unsaid, too many burned bridges that cannot be rebuilt. And in the wake of all the devastation, Habakkuk does not tell the people to buck up or look on the bright side. Instead he turns to God and faithfully cries out for justice and for healing. In response to the injustice and devastation, he lifts up words sung by psalmists from long ago and by neighbors and friends today, “How long, O Lord?”

And God responds with “Wait.” Granted it’s more poetic, but ultimately, God insists that there is a vision, that all is not lost:

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.²

And God goes on to remind Habakkuk that the righteous—the ones who are in right relationship with God and neighbor—live by their faith in contrast to the proud who see no need to rely on anyone but themselves.

Officially according to the church calendar, we in the church are in the season of Advent, the season of waiting, the season of looking for the arrival of Christ in our midst. But honestly, this season of waiting seems oh so long, doesn’t it? Yes, I hear the promise God makes to Habakkuk. I recognize that God’s timing is not supposed to run according to Ellen’s, but this not tarrying business? I don’t know, God. The promised transformation and redemption of the world seems to be tarrying quite a bit, thank you very much. Fires are raging, hearts are breaking, leaders are squabbling, children are suffering. But God goes on to assure Habakkuk—and me—for that matter that the arrogance of the wicked cannot last in any ultimate way, that the brokenness is not the last word.

My friend Caroline feels guilty that her home is still standing when so many of her friends and neighbors have lost everything. She was scheduled to meet with the insurance adjuster on Friday, but the risk of mudslide still looms. It is hard to know where or even how to step next. That next step may be the most difficult

² Habakkuk 2:3, NRSV

one of all. And yet, this strong woman of strong faith is determined to do just that and to ask me how I am and ask God's blessings on you and me from her friend's borrowed room.

Yesterday a group of us worshipped with our brothers and sisters at the Chisuk Emuna synagogue in Harrisburg. Rabbi Ron Muroff and other congregation members thanked us for coming, and several spoke of our courage in showing up and standing with them. And yet it is their courage and witness that inspire me. As you may know, their previous building was burned in a fire in 2009. They committed to staying in Harrisburg and dedicated their new building in May 2013. They know what it is to wonder what the future holds in the wake of destruction, to take those first steps in the ashes. Rabbi Muroff spoke yesterday of another Jewish community taking their first steps in the wake of tragedy, the Jewish community in Squirrel Hill. He visited Pittsburgh last weekend as the community commemorated the end of shloshim, the thirty days of ritual mourning. He mentioned that a young woman spoke of the importance of lighting candles, pointing to the candles that had been burning in memory of the eleven lives lost to that horrific anti-Semitic attack and to the candles that will be lit tonight and throughout the coming week as the Jewish community begins their celebration of Hanukkah. As you may know, these eight nights are a celebration of the miraculous survival of Judaism in the face of Greek oppression when the Maccabees found oil for the lamp in the Temple, oil that lasted for eight days and nights when it should have lasted for only one. Rabbi Muroff encouraged all of us to light candles in the coming seasons in our different traditions, to be light in the darkness, to offer warmth and hope for all who are trying to take that first step or twentieth step or three thousandth step in the midst of despair. Because in the end we may never know why the destruction comes or why God allows evil to run rampant, allows terror to strike the heart of a worshiping community, or allows brokenness to be so stubbornly persistent, but we are not left without options. We are not left without hope.

Habakkuk closes his short book with a prayer, the end of which is printed on the front of the bulletin. [Read Habakkuk 3: 17-19] After lamenting the state of the world around him, somehow Habakkuk is able to recognize that God is present with him in the midst of all that he and the community have suffered. Though everything around him speaks of death and devastation, he speaks of God's making his "feet like the deer," equipping him for the journey ahead and enabling him to take that next step on rocky terrain, to move forward

in faith.³ Because faith does not mean that all will be smooth sailing. Faith does not guarantee an easy life. In fact it may mean just the opposite. I was stunned when one woman said again yesterday how courageous it was for us to show up to walk alongside them. As her voice quaked I realized how safe my faith is and has been. I have never worried about showing up here or anywhere else to worship or pray or preach. I have never thought about lighting a candle as an act of defiance, but maybe it is. It seems so small, I feel so small, but so does one step. It wasn't a grand general who protected the Temple that first Hanukkah. It wasn't the elite who withstood the final assault on Jerusalem in Habakkuk's time. No superhero swooped in to rebuild Chisuk Emuna. No famous politician or pundit will single-handedly rebuild Malibu, California or Mexico Beach, Florida or Anchorage, Alaska. It was and will be ordinary people. People like you and me. But then again, that seems to be how God wants it done. After all, it wasn't a great warrior born to an elite household who came to redeem the world. It was a tiny child born in a stable. And that redeeming Savior did not call only the best and the brightest to do the work of his kingdom. He called fishermen and tax collectors, insisted on hugging children and teaching women, shared an ordinary meal with those who would desert him on the night before he died, and entrusted Peter, the one who denied even knowing him with the building of his church. God has always made a habit of working with and through ordinary people, not by giving them extraordinary powers, but by giving them—giving us strength to find a way to stand in the ruins of our defeats, helping us to take a step, encouraging us to light a candle, just one candle. God knows we grow weary under the weight of fear and disappointment and injustice, God knows how difficult it is to walk forward when the very ground on which we step is shaking and shifting beneath our feet, but God also equips and enables ordinary people like Habakkuk and Caroline and the Maccabees and the members of Chisuk Emuna and you and me to find a way forward, to light one candle, to take one step. And with every step, with every candle, this same Lord remains our strength and our sure foundation. And that is reason enough to rejoice.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Thanks to Dr. Craig Koester for lifting up this image here:
http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1077