

“Trust and Joy in the Midst of Trouble”

*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 will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. --Habakkuk 3:17-18*

Habakkuk the Prophet is good supplementary reading for the middle of Advent. His world in 600 BCE is in shambles (1:1-4); his country is caught between two superpowers (1:5-11); his government corruptly supports the super wealthy while the poor starve (2:6-14); his moral standards are affronted everywhere (2:15-17); and worst of all, hardly anyone worships God (2:18-20). His soul aches, he asks “Why? Why God? Why do you let this happen? Why don’t you intervene?” God replies by giving Habakkuk a vision (2:1-5) and appointing him as the watcher for his generation:

*“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that all who read it may run with it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith” (2:2-4).*

Faith alone saves us: we do not believe because we live, we live because we believe in Jesus Christ. A theophany (th-EE-ophany) resolves Habakkuk’s spiritual crisis. God appears as a dread warrior and Habakkuk is overwhelmed by this sense of God’s awesome power. All he can do is “*wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us*” (3:16). His prayer closes with one of the most beautiful expressions of trust and joy in the midst of trouble found in the whole Bible, Habakkuk 3:17-18 quoted above. Even if it gets worse, even if it gets personal, “*yet will I trust in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.*”

As the pandemic drags on, jobs disappear, businesses close, government scandals come to light, people ignore health regulations, and few turn to God, the spiritual crisis deepens. When it all gets personal, we too question God, wonder why? In our time too God keeps God’s own counsel, but that does not mean God is silent. We too receive a vision “*that speaks of the end*”, and a theophany in which “*eternal mountains are shattered and... everlasting hills sink low*” (3:6). It is not a vision of calamity upon our enemies, although there is justice in it. It is a vision of God’s grace: the creator of the universe comes in peace to open the way of salvation to all people. Mountains of life-enriching and faith-making traditions have been shattered: no gathering for Christmas! Landmark hills have disappeared from the horizon of our life: how shall we find our way back to the Lord’s ancient path? Not by following the rivers (3:8ff), nor by following victorious armies (3:7), nor by the riding the floodwaters (3:10), nor by the guidance of the moon or the stars (3:11) for they are all confused under God’s judgment. We find the way to the ancient path through this spiritual crisis by trusting in the Lord, and the signs pointing the way luminesce in the darkness with joy when the Light of Christ’s Advent shines on them.

Lord, please help us this Advent season to watch for the signs of joy that show us how to navigate all the changes, challenges, and threats that lurk in this pandemic that like your servant Habakkuk, we may trust you and share with others near and far the Light of the world, Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen