

# Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: KEEP THE FAITH

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

Analysis by Bill White

1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

The Prophet's Complaint

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you "Violence!"

and you will not save?

3 Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.

4 So the law becomes slack  
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—  
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

2 I will stand at my watchpost,  
and station myself on the rampart;  
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

2 Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets,  
so that a runner may read it.

3 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.

4 Look at the proud!  
Their spirit is not right in them,  
but the righteous live by their faith.

Author's Note: This text is a painfully wonderful example of how eternally contemporary, truthful and applicable the Word of God is as Jesus comes to us in the sacred scriptures. One need only fill in the news headlines related to human suffering: riots in our cities, constant threat of terrorist acts, ongoing wars, our misplaced faith in human political, economic and military leaders, our misplaced faith in laws (human and God's) to save and protect us, floods, storms, etc. Why God—if you really are there—do you use other countries and peoples to punish us? Why, God, do you let righteous people suffer?

DIAGNOSIS: Our Question: "God, Why Do You Allow Suffering?"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The People Are Suffering

Habakkuk's world was full of rapid political change and intrigue, international turmoil, fluctuating military alliances and bloody battles. These ongoing events brought a great deal of suffering upon the people of Judah. Their own rulers have been cruel, oppressive, and introduced the worship of foreign gods. For the Judeans this was an anxious and painful time.

The prophet Habakkuk, speaking to God for the people, asks:

"O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?"

Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.” (Habakkuk 1:2-3)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Suffering Because  
of Misplaced Faith Leads to Abandoning the Faith

Even worse, life’s experiences are causing many to become  
disillusioned with their faith and to rebel against the demands  
of the covenant. To their way of thinking and believing, the  
fact that the evils they are experiencing and witnessing even  
exist questions the effectiveness of the God of their fathers,  
the God of The Book of the Law. And if their God does exist, why  
does he permit such evil to afflict the Chosen People? If God is  
really here, why doesn’t he DO something? God, look at what a  
great job we have been trying to do in implementing Josiah’s  
reforms and keep your Law, yet, this does not seem to change  
anything or protect us from war and suffering and power-hungry  
rulers!

“So the law becomes slack  
and justice never prevails.” (Habakkuk 1:4a)

The people have placed their faith in their ability to keep  
God’s Law instead of clinging to faith in the one, true God who  
gave the Law. This, combined with their cause and effect  
thinking, has led them to abandon faith in God and seek  
salvation from other gods.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Suffering the  
Consequences

But God did not give the Law so that the people might be saved  
from sin and evil and death by consistently obeying enough of  
the laws. And worse still, God’s judgment under the Law does  
come. Because they have sinfully put their faith in the false

gods of earthly kings, armies, alliances, treaties, etc., as well as the false gods of other religions, ultimately, the Babylonians will destroy Judah.

“The wicked surround the righteous—  
therefore judgment comes forth perverted. (Habakkuk 1:4)

Judgment under the Law comes indeed, and not in the perverted form the people imagine, for no one is righteous under God’s Law.

PROGNOSIS: God’s Answer: “Trust the Suffering Servant”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God Will Act at the Appointed Time

What the people cannot see and refuse to believe is that God IS doing something. But God’s ways are not our ways and God’s timing is not our timing. What is called for is faith. But faith in who or what? Keeping faith in God and trusting that God is going to do something at the appointed time according to God’s plan and purpose which are beyond human understanding.

“Then the LORD answered me and said:  
Write the vision;  
make it plain on tablets,  
so that a runner may read 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. (Habakkuk 2:2-3)

And in only a few more centuries God’s appointed time arrives. God comes to be one of us and to live among us in the person of Jesus Christ. By his own suffering and death on the cross and his glorious resurrection, Jesus fulfills the demands of God’s Law and overcomes the power of sin, evil, and death. By faith in

this Word of God the people will be delivered from their suffering and death. Moreover, at God's appointed time this same Jesus will come again to fulfill the Kingdom of God and bring about the New Jerusalem.

#### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): The Righteous Live by Faith

Jesus comes to us today offering to take away our misplaced faith, or our lack of faith, and replace it with true faith that saves from suffering, evil, and death. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus works in us the faith that makes us righteous in the eyes of God. This faith that clings to the promise of the Gospel. By this righteousness we shall live by faith.

"Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,

but the righteous live by their faith." (Habakkuk 2:4)

#### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The righteous Live by Faith

This living faith in Christ crucified and risen empowers us to endure suffering and evil that we do not fully understand. What is more, this faith empowers us to live lives that bear witness to this faith even when we cannot fully understand or explain God's ways. When confronted with the questions why does God allow tragically evil things to happen and why does God use "bad" earthly armies and countries to punish "good" armies and countries, this faith empowers Christians to say, "I don't know, but I believe ultimately God is doing something according to God's ways and timeline, and in the mean time, I will cling to the promises of Christ." In other words, by faith in Christ we may join Habakkuk in saying:

"I will stand at my watchpost,

and station myself on the rampart;

I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,  
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.” (Habakkuk 2:1)