

How Long, Already?

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Sermon for October 7, 2007

Pentecost 19 [27] in Year C

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

Psalm 37:1-9

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

"How long, oh Lord? How long?" Thus cries the prophet Habakkuk in the first lesson. Or as we might say today, and as I definitely say to God on a regular basis, "How long, already?"

Both Habakkuk and I, and I suppose, I hope, you too, have had enough of waiting for God to do something about the problems of this world. We have had enough of saying to people, "God is there, he cares, and he will take care of things," only to have him seem to make liars and fools of us, and not do a whole lot of good for his own image.

I've thought to myself many times that God is his own worst PR person. He apparently doesn't care how often his name gets dragged through the mud and attached to ideas and ways that we certainly hope aren't his. He doesn't seem to care that a lot of the problems we have in our world could be solved just by a little communication - a little understandable communication.

I don't know about you, but I'm not really concerned about evil in the world. That doesn't bother me. I figure there will always be mean people who don't give a flying rat's hindparts about their neighbor. That's why I've always cast a cynical eye at the bumper stickers that say "If you want peace, work for justice." These idealists don't seem to

grasp that even in a perfectly just world, there would be greedy people who would try to find a way to get more than they honestly deserve, and who would use violence to get it.

No, I understand pure naked evil. My big issue with God is the tragedy of competing good religious intentions. It's no secret that a great number of evils that have been visited upon the world for centuries have been done in the name of religion. Evils that are done because we firmly believe that we're on God's side, and are doing what he wants us to do by eliminating or marginalizing those who don't quite see him - or her - our way.

Well frankly, I've had enough of it. "How long, already?" I ask. How long will it take for God to sit down with those of us who honestly claim to believe in him and want to do his will, and give us all the same message, that we'll understand clearly?

I think of the many tragedies that could've been avoided had God just communicated with us clearly. The Great Schism, the Crusades, the circumstances that brought on the Protestant Reformation, the Salem Witch Trials, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, 9/11.

I joke with Pastor Paul that his problem is that he expects too much from people, while my problem is that I expect too much from God. And yet a big part of me believes that if God would just be a little clearer on his part, then maybe we could do a little better at our part.

I said that God seems to be his own worst PR person, allowing himself to become less and less relevant to our world because he will not make himself known to many who honestly and sincerely call on him - and who lose faith as a result. If God, as we've been taught, knows everything, then how is it that he doesn't seem to know that we frail and stupid humans need feedback in order to tell whether or not we're doing the right thing, and in order to know that we're truly loved and cared about? If God behaved like this as a regular human parent, we'd have Social Services after him for benign neglect.

As a result, I, like Habakkuk, continually cry out, "How long, already?" Why does God seem to wait until a situation is almost totally out of control before he steps in, if he even chooses to step in at all, when a simple word or nudge early on could've spared tons of people countless grief?

How long already? How long do I have to put up with all of this apparent incompetence from the one who's supposed to know all and care for us all?

1976 was a very good year in which to start to go blind. At least it was for me.

It was during that Bicentennial summer that I first noticed that something was amiss in my left eye. First of all, everything was just a shade darker in that eye than in my right. But then, even more disturbing, was the fact that sometimes everything in the field of vision of the upper right-hand half of my left eye would just disappear.

In the fall I finally got around to checking it out. The eye doctor I went to told me that I had a slight skesis, a retinal tear, and that I should make an appointment to see a specialist as soon as possible. He never told me that this was a medical emergency.

Since I was a brand new employee at SU, and didn't have a whole lot of vacation time to work with yet, I scheduled that appointment for my next day off - about a month later. That specialist was incredulous that I had waited so long to see him about something that was so important. But what did I know? Perhaps in an attempt to prevent me from panicking about it, the first doctor told me that I had nothing to worry about. The second one said that there was a major retinal detachment in the left eye and the beginnings of one in the right, and that we needed to schedule surgery as soon as possible.

And this is why 1976 was a very good year for me to start to go blind. My friend John's father had been an optometrist, and his mother was an optician. When John heard about my eyes, he asked his mother for some more information. What he had to tell me was both fascinating and sobering.

Apparently, in the "old days," as little as 15 years earlier, the best that doctors could do for someone with a detached retina was to keep them flat on their back in bed, with sandbags on both sides of their head to keep it perfectly still, in the hope that this might cause the retina to reattach itself. The success rate for this procedure wasn't all that great.

However, thanks to the work of Frenchman Charles Schepens, there were new ways of looking at the retina and treating the detachment. In my case they'd be using liquid nitrogen to freeze the retina back into place, and putting a thin silicone

band around my eye in order to stabilize things once they were done with the liquid nitrogen. And yes, for the squeamish, but curious among you, this meant that they actually had to take my eyes out and open them up.

The surgery was scheduled for November, at Crouse Hospital. As they rolled me into surgery, and as the anesthetic was starting to take effect, I was telling some of my favorite Helen Keller jokes. After all, I figured that if I couldn't tell them then, then I had no right to ever tell them.

A few hours later I awoke in total darkness. That didn't worry me at all, since both eyes were bandaged. They'd remain that way for another day, and then I'd get to see with my newly repaired eyes. Not that I'd want to be doing a whole lot of it, as I was soon to find out.

Squeamishness alert here. You see, the next day, when they removed the bandages and had me look around, there was a searing pain in my head. It was bad enough just looking straight on at things, but looking to either side was excruciating. That was because of the stitches they used to put my eyes back together at the end of the surgery. Each time I looked to one side or the other, they would scrape across the inside of my head, putting me into intense pain. Fortunately, those stitches were done with self-dissolving sutures, so they wouldn't have to go back in to take them out, and the pain would go away in a few days. A few days during which I made a point of keeping my eyes closed, and learning to navigate around my hospital room without being able to see.

By the time I was discharged from Crouse three days later, the stitches had indeed dissolved, and the pain was gone. Or so I thought.

I don't remember how soon after I left the hospital they started, but once or twice a week I'd be hit with absolutely horrible eye aches. They weren't quite headaches, as they were definitely localized behind my eyes. I've never had a migraine, so I don't know how these compare, but they were absolutely awful. I remember quite a few times on choir tour that spring when I just sat with my head buried in a friend's lap during the ride, while I rocked back and forth from the pain. I'll tell you though, that I made sure that I sat next to the prettiest friends, just in case one of those attacks came on.

And I'm quite sure that during at least one of these attacks I mentally cried out, "How long already? For Pete's sake, God, how long do I have to endure this?"

And then, one day, they were gone. One day I realized that it had been months since I'd last had one of those mind-numbingly awful eye aches. And those months turned into years - 30 of them, in fact.

How long, oh Lord? How long already? How long do we have to put up with evil and stupidity? Especially how long do we have to put up with those things done in your name? When are you going to do something about what people are doing to your reputation? Can't you even control your own followers, or those who claim to follow you? Can't you smack upside the head those who would use your name to mislead and harm us? Can't you tell us when we're dealing with one of these people? Can't you give us a clear answer when we tell you that we're confused about what you want us to do? Hey, I'm asking for the right things here, as is everyone else in this room. It's not like we're asking to win the lottery. Why can't you give it to us?

I used to be really ticked about the fact that I'd pray for the right things, that we'd pray for the right things, and usually would see no tangible result. We pray for peace in the world, we pray for the wisdom to know how to attain peace in the world, and still we have not only violence between countries, but neighbors who can't hold a civil conversation. What's going on here?

And then one day I had an epiphany. Yes, I know this is still Pentecost, but I had an epiphany anyway. My five-year-old daughter Sofie once asked me what "obvious" means, and I told her that it means, "like duh." When something is obvious, you hit yourself in the head and go, "like duh!" Well my epiphany was one of those "like duh" moments.

I realized that I was but one of the most recent in a long line of faithful people to cry out, "How long, already?" I was one of a long line of people who also felt disappointed by the response they got from God. And this being the case, what made me so special that I thought that I should get to see results when they didn't?

Whoa...

On the other hand, while that definitely put me in my place, I quickly came back with another question. OK, so I'm not that special, I can handle that. But don't all those other people who cried out "How long, already?" count for anything? Shouldn't we have seen some improvement in the world, or at least a little better communication, because of their faithfulness and determination?

No answer again.

Or is there?

Habakkuk starts out by saying "How long, already?" but ends with God's response that the time will surely come. It may seem like it

takes forever, it may be long after we've passed from the scene, but it will indeed come.

I had no idea at the time just how long those eye aches would go on. Would it be weeks, months, years? And even as I cried out "how long, already?" about the pain, I was thankful for what that pain represented - the fact that I was not blind. As I think about it now, that pain was probably part of the healing process of the surgery that saved my eyesight.

I've seen with no pain for 30 years now, and if I had to do it again, I would. Because I know now that while the pain feels like it'll go on forever, it does end.

We ask "how long already?" for the problems we see here on this earth. We ask how long I'll go on seemingly expecting too much of God while Pastor Paul goes on expecting too much of people. We ask how long it'll be before God gives us a little bit more to work with so that we can actually do a better job by and for each other. And we're told that this time will come. It may seem like it takes forever, but it will indeed come.

And here's a little Pentecost epiphany for you. Perhaps, just as the pain I went through during the first year after my eye surgery was part of the healing process, our disappointment and longing for God to do something to make things better are part of the process of our becoming more of what he wants us to be.

I also got a little epiphany from my friend John. You see, I sent him the first draft of this sermon. And he said a few things that got me thinking that perhaps we're so

focused on the big picture that we don't see all of the little ones.

What do I mean by this? It seems pretty clear to me that God always finds a way to redeem a situation, no matter how horrible. Yes, as in the story of Joseph and his brothers, God often finds a way to bring good things out of evil intentions and tragic results.

I have a friend who was conceived on November 22nd, 1963. The day that President Kennedy was assassinated. Don't ask me how I know this, but this friend was conceived precisely because JFK had been assassinated. His parents were horribly distraught at the news of what had happened that day, and as they "comforted each other," they suffered what I'll delicately refer to as a "contraceptive failure," and he was conceived. He grew up to become a teacher who is loved and respected by hundreds, if not thousands, of students; and who knows what positive effect this one person, born as a direct result of a horrible tragedy, will end up having on the world through all of the students he's had a chance to influence? JFK's assassination was the big picture, but my friend, and the countless others who were conceived on that day are the little pictures. How different a world would it be for us without all of those little pictures?

In another little picture, I'm sure that Latrobe High School football player Jim Stombaugh must've asked "How long, already?" when he was sidelined by a kidney injury that put him in the hospital. I'm also sure that his teammates and the whole school was concerned about what his injury meant for their season. But while he was laid

up in the hospital, Stombaugh befriended the dumpy, shy, awkward kid who volunteered to bring him his books and assignments every day, pulled him into his social circle, and gave him the confidence to do new things.

I doubt that anyone remembers or even cares what Latrobe's season was like that year; and few people have even heard of Jim Stombaugh. But because of the little picture of his friendship with the kid who brought him his books, the world has become a better neighborhood in many ways, and his influence continues through the millions of little pictures who still visit with Fred Rogers.

Finally, it is perhaps too soon, and the wound still too raw, to consider the possibility of at least 2900 little pictures quietly redeeming the events of September 11th in ways that have little or nothing to do with the events of that horrible day, but it's worth considering.

Maybe God is working almost imperceptibly through the little pictures, and maybe the things we do while we're waiting to see God to step in are actually part of the process being used to bring about the day when we no longer cry out "How long, already?"

Habakkuk says that it may seem futile now, but the time will come when God will step in and make things right. He may even be doing it now - through us.

This is most certainly true.