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Ministry on the Ramparts

KATIE HAYS

How many texts do you know from the prophet-poet Habakkuk? You might be surprised. You've sung Habakkuk's worshipful vision: "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!" (Hab 2.20). You've read Hannah Hurnard's *Hind's Feet on High Places*, which draws its title from Habakkuk's closing verses: "...[H]e makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights" (Hab 3.19). And of course, the Apostle Paul derived his (our) soteriology from Habakkuk's description of life in God's care: "The righteous live by their faith" (Hab 2.4b; see Rom 1.17 and Gal 3.11).

THE PROPHET'S LAMENT

Habakkuk worked as a *nabi* (temple prophet) in Judah, serving Jerusalem's worshipers with oracles and psalms. He presented his insights as a high-stakes conversation between himself, standing in for the righteous and oppressed, and God. To begin the dialogue, Habakkuk mourned the chaotic scramble for wealth and position among Judah's higher-ups and the resulting systemic perversion of justice (Hab 1.1-4). When God pointed to a mounting military threat from the Babylonians ("Chaldeans" in Hab 1.6) as an answer to the prophet's complaint (Hab 1.5-11), Habakkuk expressed his dread of the coming ravages of invasion (Hab 1.12-17) —a prophetic "Be careful what you wish for" moment.

Mourning and dread: these are Habakkuk's hues, a palate of cold grays fading to black as he mourns the present moment and dreads what is yet to come. "How long, O Lord, shall I cry for help, / and you will not listen? / Or cry to you 'Violence!' / and you will not save?" (Hab 1.2) His cries to God take on the familiar language and rhythm of the Psalms of lament — only prophets, unlike psalmists, are sometimes granted a two-way conversation. Sometimes the Almighty talks back:

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.
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 (Hab 2.1-3).

A PERSONAL LAMENT

The scribble on the title page says “Hays 1997,” so we had suffered both miscarriages by the time I bought *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* by Martin Marty (Harper & Row, 1983). Twice, Lance and I had given our hearts to the life taking shape inside me. Twice, we had announced to friends and neighbors that we had found favor with God in this particular and miraculous way. Twice, after many weeks of hoping, we had seen the extinguished miracles on sonogram screens and felt our punctured hearts deflate under the pressure of grief and fear.

Now, two children and several years later, I know that there are many more ways to experience much more pain than this. I do; I know. But during that time of our suffering, I learned a valuable lesson for life and ministry: *it hurts as much as it hurts*. And if it’s the most hurt you’ve ever felt, if it hurts more than anything has ever hurt you before, then the comparative study of all the possible ways one *could* be hurt is simply not helpful. *It hurts as much as it hurts*. And in 1997, I was hurting like hell.

Marty’s short book on the Psalms of lament is a little dry, not terribly scholarly; and there is no index for his discussions of dozens of those Psalms. (I made my own, in inky lists, inside the cover.) But reading the book, there’s no way to deny its authenticity: *This man is acquainted with suffering*, you think. *He knows how much this hurts*. Indeed, in the second printing of *A Cry of Absence*, Marty was encouraged by his publisher to include a preface explaining the book’s *Sitz im Leben*. His wife of forty years had died, slowly and at home, while he cared for her, reading Psalms to her through long sleepless nights. *Yes, he knows how much this hurts*.

Marty’s book legitimated a secret realization that was growing in me: that not all faith is of the “summery” sort, the cheerful, confident, chin-up kind that brushes off adversity with complete trust that it’s all for the best. I had been taught that the opposite of summer faith is unfaith. Not so, said Marty, drawing on the Psalmists’ voices to prove his point. Wintry spirituality—the cold, barren landscape of the grieving, fearful heart—this is the disposition from which the deepest cries to God are bellowed. These are the raw souls that are starved and dehydrated for right-ness, for God’s presence to be made manifest in tangible displays of justice. Far from excluding the winter voices of mourning and dread from our churches, we should exalt them as they were exalted in scripture. We must acknowledge the reality of God’s absence in order to crave and cling to God’s presence.

That’s how Habakkuk’s verses came to be my favorite text for ministry. This prophet-poet, Marty pointed out, was of the wintry sort, spiritually speaking. I picture Habakkuk in woolly hat and mittens against the cold winds of his elevated watchpost on the rampart of the city wall. He planted himself up there, planning to stay till he heard a satisfactory reply to his questions. “How long, O Lord?” he had wailed at first. And receiving not the comfort he hoped for but only more ravaging violence, he changed his tactic. “I’ll stand here till I hear good news,” he muttered as he scrambled up the wall. “We’re getting killed down here. He’s going to have to do better than that” (Hab 2:1).

GOD’S ANSWER

God’s answer in Habakkuk 2.2-3 is a text I know by heart. I’ve scribbled it into notes of encouragement, worked it into prayers, used it as a benediction, preached sermons on it, opened and closed committee meetings with it, sent it in countless emails to searching souls who want to know what God is doing with them, for them, to them. Receivers of this text don’t usually need it to be interpreted, but here’s what I mean when I share it with others:

1. *There is still a vision for the appointed time*. The apparent chaos of the moment is not the only thing there is to see. God still has God’s eye on you and knows how (and cares enough) to weave this evil mess into the ultimate redemption of all things.

2. *It speaks of the end, and does not lie.* Your suffering is finite. It may last a long time, but it will not last forever. This is true. This is one of God's promises to you.

3. *If it seems to tarry, wait for it.* Waiting is sometimes the only thing to do. This is a hateful proposition to most of us; waiting is misunderstood as passive, powerless inaction. But the watchful waiting encouraged throughout the Bible (think of Jesus and the nighttime parables) requires that we cultivate an acute sensitivity to the sly movements of our subtle-for-now God. Imagine a relay runner waiting on the track for her teammate to hand her the baton from behind: she listens, she watches, she stands flexed to burst out of stillness the moment her brain receives the "touch" signal from her palm. She waits like someone who is certain that what she's waiting for is coming.

4. *When it comes will be no time to linger.* This is the New English Bible translation of the last line of verse three. The vision, the understanding, the relief we wait for often comes in a dam-bursting deluge of clarity or mercy or release. Of course, sometimes it doesn't; but whether you wake to sudden, sweet sunshine or it dawns on you gradually, you want to be ready to go with what you're given.

"The righteous live by their faith." These words so familiar to us as readers of Paul can be appreciated anew when we notice that they immediately follow God's promise of a coming vision to Habakkuk. This "faith" is the believer's *trust*, the necessary trust that grows in those who live expectantly between the promise of the end of suffering and the arrival of that end. "Righteousness is not judged by human capacity to understand the mind of God in world history, but rather in a faithful response of obedience which lives in God's promise."¹ We *trust* God, living in the promise, and so are reckoned righteous.

Those of us who live in God's promise, and especially those of us who try to communicate God's promise, would do well to notice one more thing about Habakkuk 2.2-3. When God is speaking for God's self, God does not over-promise. There are no specifics about the coming vision: only a promise that God has one, and that it will be revealed in time. As a minister and a recipient of ministry I have come to appreciate the grand restraint of this pledge.

There are many souls in our congregations and in our world who stand freezing on the windy ramparts, demanding a better answer from God. Habakkuk invites us to join them there with the reminder that this, too, is an act of faith, one that God dares to honor with a promise. May God add a blessing to our ministry on the ramparts.

Katie Hays ministered with Churches of Christ for eleven years, most recently in West Islip, New York. She currently serves as the minister of Lawrenceville First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in suburban Atlanta, Georgia.



1. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 453.