

Advent 1: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-4; 3:17-19
November 30, 2014
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“If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” This week as I read that passage, my niece was laboring to deliver my parent’s first great grandchild. I texted the line to my sister because the baby was a week over due and the afternoon was getting long. I meant it as a little joke. Instead, she cried. Good tears but not the reaction I expected. We waited and waited. And prayed. “It will surely come, it will not delay.” Waiting is so, so hard. Even if we are waiting for something that is sure to come at an appointed time. Like children waiting for Christmas or the arrival of a friend.

Habakkuk, however, is most definitely NOT talking about the arrival of the blessed, long awaited first grandchild. Instead he is talking about the ache that comes in waiting for something we are no longer sure will ever arrive.

At the end of October the militant group Boko Haram overtook the town of Mubi in eastern Nigeria. The Lutheran congregation there has been partnered with First Lutheran Church of Crystal for over 20 years. They lost friends in the attack. On the 17th of November, less than three weeks after the attack, a member of First got this email. The woman writing from Nigeria is named Bless Timothy. She writes:

[Sheryl, thank you all for your concern and prayers. Hauwa, Neils and myself and all our families came out safe. All the churches in Mubi including LCCN No 1 have been burnt down. I am sure of 4 members of our church that have been slaughtered - Baba Haziell Babaru, Mr Elmodan and his two grown twin sons Henry and Jerry. His wife was abducted. We heard she escaped but till now she hasnt resurface. There are lots of killings but since every one has either escaped or killed there is no one there to contact. All the dead bodies are left there on the streets and homes. We heard that the army have recaptured Mubi but the insurgents moved to Gombi and captured it,

in which I heard (not reliably) that they burnt down the Shalholma diocese cathedral. I contacted our bishop, Dimga Jones Kadabiyu about it, he said he heard about it but wasn't sure. He is now in his village. Mubi is still a no go area. There is the fear that the insurgents may want to extend their move to Yola the Adamawa state capital. Every one around Yola lives in fear. Thank God the soldiers and the local vigilante and hunters are doing their best to see that they recapture all the captured towns. The problem is, when the army drove them out of any town or village, they always regroup and come back for a more killings and destruction. I am at now at Guyuk and Hauwa and her family are in Numan, while Neils is Yola. I will keep you in touch of any development if hear about it. We really appreciate your concern and prayers. My greetings to the Lutheran brethren over there especially Pastor Terry Frovik, Gail Fields, Todd Grover, Jamie Johnson and Kris Perry. Remain Blessed. Bless.]

“If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” The words sound different in this context doesn't it? The Boko Haram are like the Babylonians, sweeping across the countryside destroying lives, cities, churches as they go, taking women and girls into exile. The faithful people of God cry out: “How long, O Lord? How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” And God's response? Wait for it.

It's hard to imagine what it would be like to cling to faith when your church and your neighbors' churches are burning. When those you love are dead or scattered. When the government seems powerless to bring a permanent end to the devastation. It's hard for anyone to cling to faith when the world feels riddled with violence and destruction: Ferguson, Nigerian, Florida,

Mexico, Oklahoma, the Ukraine, the Middle East, churches, schools, businesses and synagogues. It aches. It feels like we're at a tipping point where one more shot fired, one more beheading, one more punch thrown might be...I don't know what it might be, to tell you the truth. But it feels like one more act of violence would be all it would take and then all is lost.

A friend talks about the deep, soul sadness that such unrelenting violence stirs up in us. Most of you have experienced that deep soul sadness apart the violence in the world. Maybe your church isn't the church you remember. Or your marriage. Or your health. The truth is that we each very likely experience deep soul sadness during our lifetimes. Often there is nothing particular that can be fixed, nothing changed to make it go away; except grief and time. "...wait for it; it will surely come..."

Remember last week we were listening to the words of Jeremiah and the harsh reality that God was not going to protect Jerusalem from violence. Jeremiah was calling God's people to lives of generosity, community, humility and care for the most vulnerable. Only through in obedience to God could the community would be woven together with strength and endurance and only then would they be able to stand against the violence at their gates.

Habakkuk's message is similar. The book of Habakkuk is a short one and we read just parts of it this morning. If you take the time to read the whole thing you would hear Habakkuk raising the cries of the people, calling for justice. And God's unsatisfying, terrifying response: "I give you justice! See! Justice is at the gates. The Babylonians are coming to deliver the justice that is right, meet and salutary for a stiff-necked, disobedient, self-serving people!" Habakkuk doesn't back down. Habakkuk stands at the watch tower arguing the case of the people. And God

responds again. God names the sins of the people: "...heaping up what is not your own...evil gain for your houses...you who build a town by bloodshed...you who make your neighbors drink your wrath...you who worship idols." God's claim is against those who misuse power and practice idolatry. And God is just. Therefore justice will come. And it will be hard justice.

The people of God are aching with a deep soul sadness we can hear in the words of Habakkuk: "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." Can you feel that ache, that deep soul sadness? Certainly those are the words of our brothers and sisters in Nigeria as their churches burn. Certainly those are the words of our brothers and sisters of color across our nation as they wait and wait for racial injustice and inequity to finally end. Certainly those are the words of a young woman in a long and arduous labor. Will it come? Will you not save?

God has a word for the people in the face of the coming justice; God has a word for the faithful in Nigeria; God has a word for you. "There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and it does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

God asks one thing of the people of God. God asks one thing of us: faithfulness. Faithfulness in the face of hard justice, faithfulness in the face of long labor, faithfulness in the face of suffering. God does not offer faith as an answer to our suffering. Faith is not the answer to hard questions. Faith is a way of life as we move through suffering and struggle with the questions.

Think of a child in a war torn or famine ridden country, holding the hand of her mother. Her mother cannot stop the tanks. Her mother cannot fill her belly. But holding her mother's hand

reminds her that there is something outside of her fear or her hunger. She is comforted in the face of her suffering. She knows who she is and who she belongs to and she perseveres because her mother is there to hold on to. Faithfulness is like holding the hand of the Lord. It is a beautiful image. You are never too old, too macho, too worldly to be past the point in life when you need the hand of the Lord.

The closing passage of Habakkuk is a beautiful bit of poetry that describes deep, soul sadness in startling beautiful language: “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...” A picture of emptiness; even despair. And then Habakkuk continues: “...yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.”

Not quiet, passive waiting. Not submission to suffering. Instead active praise, worship, prayer and hope in God. Hold on. Wait for it. It will come. Amen.