

“WAITING FOR THE BEGINNING”
Habbakuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10
Sermon

Way back when I was still a bachelor I had a dog named, Zacchaeus. Zak would go anywhere at anytime if I would take him. He absolutely loved to ride in the front seat of the car, where he would sit straight up, looking at everything and everyone that went by. (This was in the days before cars were routinely air-conditioned and when my car windows were nearly always open.) Knowing how inquisitive Zak was and how tempting it would be for him to jump out the window and investigate something that had caught his attention, I made a point of keeping him on a leash and wrapping the leash around my hand while driving. On a particularly warm day, windows all the way down; I must have let go of the leash inadvertently. I looked over and Zak was nowhere to be found. Then I spotted the leash! It had gotten caught between the windowpane and the door. I slowed down and attempted to pull over when I glimpsed Zak’s head as it popped up and down. He was still attached to the leash and was running valiantly to keep pace with my speed even as he tried to jump up and down to see where I was. It must have made an interesting sight. Zak, running to keep up to the car from which he had jumped, still tethered but in danger, the driver going along seemingly unaware that he was in trouble.

Now I’m not one of those people who ascribe human traits to dogs. But I have speculated over the years about their ability to think, to reason. In doing so, I have imagined the inner conversation going on as he ran along, jumping up and down, hoping I would see him.

*I wonder if he knows I’m gone!
He’ll never stop; keeping his eye on the road is more important!
Maybe if I get where he can see me, he’ll stop.
Why is this happening to me, I’ve been a good pet?
Will this ride end before I die?*

*I know I should not have jumped out the window, but doesn’t he have the responsibility
to save me? He is in charge after all!*

At any rate that episode, which ended, as it should, came to me as I pondered the meaning of this morning’s lessons. The first is from Habbakuk, writing hundreds of years before Jesus. He was a prophet during the time when Babylon ruled Israel, when most of its citizens were in exile in Babylonia. For him, as a Jew, who believed that Israel had a covenant relationship with Israel, the situation made no sense. Nowhere, no way would he have assumed that exile, injustice, cruelty would be a part of that covenant relationship. It simply did not make sense. My guess is that he had all of Habbakuk’s questions, as well as something of the same experience. Yahweh, his master, to whom he had dedicated himself, leashed himself, if you will, was nowhere to be seen. Every now and then he might have gotten a glimpse of Him, but seemingly he wasn’t going to stop and rescue him. He gives voice to his questions in different words than Habbakuk’s, but the gist is the same.

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

....

***Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.***

Habbakuk did not know what to do! Somehow he managed to find a way. Somehow he managed to head back to the beginning, to where he first entered the covenant. It was a place of waiting to be seen, of waiting to be noticed, a place of trusting that his master would redeem him.

***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***

And Habbakuk is rewarded for his decision to return to the beginning, to a time of expectant hope, a time of trusting in the unseen hand of Yahweh, a time of believing that the momentary problems and afflictions are not the last word.

***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.***

Standing where he can be seen, standing where Yahweh wants him to be, hopefully waiting on God's time, guarantees that rescue will come. And history assures us that Israel returned home, his watchful waiting for the beginning was not fruitless.

And then there is Zacchaeus. A tax collector by trade, he made his living by collecting the tax required by Rome and charging well over and above the required amount to line his own pockets. Hated by his neighbors, he needed a friend! Now we don't know much more than this about him, but we can surmise. It wasn't always like this. Early in his life, before the decision to collect taxes for Rome, life was different. People did not shun him. People did not speak meanly of him. He must have wondered if he had made a wrong choice and how he could correct it. Likely that was what led him to seek Jesus. Undoubtedly he had heard about him and his teaching. Undoubtedly he had heard how Jesus redirected lives. And so he finds himself in the very place where he might see and hear Jesus. But the crowd is thick and unforgiving. Not one in the crowd will make room for him to get close. Reminiscent of his childhood days when he climbed onto the lap of a parent for reassurance and comfort, where he climbed to see a different vision of his present situation, Zacchaeus climbs into a sycamore tree, literally going out on a limb.

And from this vantagepoint he is able to see Jesus, and, more importantly, Jesus is able to see him. And, to say the least, Zacchaeus was never again the same.

That's the way it is! When people of faith return to their beginnings, when they return to the foundations of their faith, everything changes. Habbakuk and Zacchaeus come to us this morning with a clear message. When we feel as if we are in danger of losing hope, in danger of falling into cynicism, in danger of despair, there is another possibility. It is the possibility of returning to our beginnings, of returning to our foundational belief that, despite what we see, God still has a vision for us and that vision shall come to fruition at the appointed time.

I think in my lifetime of the pervasive feeling that bigotry and racism would always be institutionalized in our society. Jim Crow laws, denying people the right to vote because of the color of their skin; segregation laws that kept people from equal and open participation in our culture because of the color of their skin are very recent memories and facts in our land. But some, led largely by Martin King, Jr. went to their basic belief that God saw people differently, and lived out the divine vision, beginning a new day in our nation.

I remember dating a woman who was a classmate of mine in seminary. Many thought she was wasting her time and money preparing for the ordained ministry. Her church was closed to that possibility. But she, and others, returned to their basic belief that God saw differently, that God had a vision of inclusivity and acted out the vision. She, and others, paved the way for hundreds of capable and committed women.

And the list could go on forever of things changing for the better, coming more in line with God's vision, when people return to foundational beliefs, when people return to the beginning.

And that list, along with Habbakuk and Zacchaeus, is instructive for us.

As in every generation, for people of faith, questions are raised about the validity of our faith.

How can we read the newspaper, how can we turn on our television sets, how can we listen to candidates for public office who tell us how bad things are and how afraid we ought to be, and not question our faith and its foundational beliefs? How do we not question where a God of power and love is in all of this? How can we not cry with Habbakuk, ***O LORD, HOW LONG SHALL I CRY FOR HELP, AND YOU WILL NOT LISTEN? OR CRY TO YOU "VIOLENCE" AND YOU WILL NOT SAVE?***

From where we stand we must join in the cry. BUT, there is always a BUT, when we return to our beginnings, when we return to our basic statements of faith, inspired by that divine voice, which always seems to push its way through, we have a different response. When we return to doing the best we can, acting on God's word as best we can, our response is different. When we return to remember that our beginning walk in faith

began with the awareness that we were not alone, we find the conviction to return with Habbakuk and with Zacchaeus, and with all the others who did so, to the watchpost watching and waiting, hopefully and expectantly. And when we return to watching and waiting – even as we do what we know God wants us to do – we will not be disappointed. We will hear the words:

***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.***

I invite you this morning, climb out on that limb with Zacchaeus. You will surely hear the word of Jesus, ***HURRY AND COME DOWN; FOR I MUST STAY AT YOUR HOUSE TODAY.***

I invite you to return to the beginning, a time of hope and expectation, a time of being those who knew, despite what they saw, that God had a better vision, and that in God's good time, that vision would prevail.