

“Scary Hope”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:2-4; 3:17-19a  
December 2, 2018  
First Sunday of Advent

Oh Habakkuk!  
Just because it's Advent —  
(and at Advent you tell the truth)  
to me, you are perfect.

You say what we're thinking: Why? How long? There's violence. And justice hardly ever seems to win out. And the wicked are toasting their wickedness. And we keep having to see all this trouble and try to make sense of it. How long, O Lord?

And the prophet gets one of those replies; one of those “it will surely come” visions with an appointed time. It's so *Advent-y*. Just hang on. God's got this. Not much longer now. Wait.

Well, that's just great.

Habakkuk, we need to talk. It's not you. It's me.

I struggle with this promise. It seems so small in the face of such overwhelming gloominess, and I don't have to worry about Babylonians. I feel underwhelmed by God's “I got this” when children — our children, our siblings in faith and humanity — are tear-gassed. I have a hard time feeling like hanging on when so much death is in the air at our border and in places like South Sudan and Afghanistan and...Hoover. I struggle with “wait.”

With chaos and brutality making our world their playground, this promise — this “wait” — feels like one small flicker in a vast and consuming night.

And yet, you hang on, Habakkuk. You seem to know something. Despite no fruit on the vines and no home for the flock, you persist in rejoicing. You persist in exultation. You persist in hope.

And that is no small thing.

A people waiting in hope is absolutely terrifying to the powers of destruction and oppression, mighty as they might be. A group of folks who tend to a light in the shadows is scary to empires of domination. It's right up there with educated women and people who ask too many questions and minority groups that vote and scientists with access to funding and artists with free speech.

Just ask the Nazis.

In 1940, a church newspaper in Basel, Switzerland published a column titled “Word on the (Current) Situation.” It included an excerpt from the book of the prophet Habakkuk. The military censors banned the paper, seeing the words of a prophet calling out to God as a critique of the Third Reich.<sup>1</sup> Oh Habakkuk, who knew your book was so dangerous!

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary by Julianna Claassens at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2238&fbclid=IwAR23ThlLxZhdxvem86KMyTZ3juKfxL97\\_Tx8oqK5U\\_NP4ib9Erlmtd\\_8Gc](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2238&fbclid=IwAR23ThlLxZhdxvem86KMyTZ3juKfxL97_Tx8oqK5U_NP4ib9Erlmtd_8Gc)

He's not the only prophet who has upset the empire. In Advents past we've talked about how Christian churches in India were banned from singing the Magnificat under British Colonial rule and how military governments in Argentina, and then Guatemala, banned displays of Mary's song to stop their use by dissidents and to prevent the poor from being stirred-up.

A small break in the overwhelming dread is a virus that the caretakers of oppression cannot abide. That's why a prophet's business card lists email address and phone number and who to contact in case of assassination.

People with no reason for hope and faith who maintain hope and faith are disruptive. People who embrace the waiting and look beyond and above and through are problematic. They see that not only does the emperor have no clothes, but that no earthly empire has staying power beyond its ability to drown out dissent. I struggle with the wait, but the wait knows what comes before and after and so the wait has hope.

On Friday, October 26th, at 1 p.m., the Tamrazyan family — two parents, two teens, and a young adult — arrived at Bethel Church in The Hague in the Netherlands. They had been in the Netherlands for nearly six years, having been granted asylum after the father received death threats for his political activity in their homeland of Armenia. The Netherlands has recently taken a harsher stance on immigrants and refugees. The Dutch government appealed the asylum decision, but lost in court. The government appealed again, and lost. On the third try, it was ruled that the family could be deported.

Under Dutch law, under most circumstances, authorities from the Ministry of Justice and Security cannot conduct a raid in a place where a religious service is happening. So, Bethel Church, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and clergy from every denomination in the country and even across borders, have been praying, preaching, singing, and reading for the past thirty-seven days. They do it in shifts, around the clock. They've had sermons in Dutch, English, French, and German. Pastors who would normally never lead worship together for ecclesiastical reasons are handing off the baton to one another in the middle of the night.<sup>2</sup>

And churches around the world light one candle this morning as we begin the season of waiting for the Christ child, who would be a refugee before he knew his Torah.

Later, his disciples discovered how threatening a spark of hope could be.  
And so did the early Church.

God told Habakkuk: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it." Neither the prophet nor his God could imagine the speed with which we run now. The vision must be so clear — and probably in a suitable font and perhaps with a bunch of arrows.

This is the time to be reoriented to a small, simple, enormous, radical hope. This is the time to prepare for transformation. This is the time to prepare the earth for an outbreak of justice. On a global scale, this is the time. In your work and family and in front of your kitchen sink, this is the time.

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<sup>2</sup> 5 Weeks and Counting: Dutch Church Holds Worship Marathon to Protect Migrant Family - <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/europe/bethel-church-netherlands-deportation.html>  
Thanks to Anna Velasco for sending this article my way.

This is the time. In the murky dusk. In the dark. By just a touch of light.  
Reach out for hope. Startle the powers of misery and despair and cynicism and not-enough-ness with  
your joy and your strength, small as they may be.

The Rev. Eugenia Gamble used to pastor in downtown Birmingham, and she likes to end workshops and conferences and worship services with a blessing that she is quick to point out is of unknown origin, probably from the Franciscans.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't written specifically for the First Sunday of Advent, when we always hear apocalyptic proclamations and prophetic exhortations.

But maybe it should have been:

May God bless you with discomfort  
with easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships,  
so that you will live deeply  
and from the heart.

And may God bless you with anger  
at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people,  
so that you will work  
for justice, freedom, and peace.

And may God bless you with tears to shed  
for those who mourn,  
so you will reach out your hands to them  
and turn mourning into joy.

And may God bless you with just enough foolishness  
to believe that you can make a difference in this world  
so that you will do those things that others say  
cannot be done.

Welcome to Advent, Edgewood.  
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1 John 1:1-5)  
Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, p. 153