

Signs God Wants Carried at the Protest
Habakkuk 2:1-5

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Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. Hab. 2:2

All summer long we have been watching marchers take to the streets in city after city in protest.

Some of the protests turned violent. All violence, including the destruction of property is wrong.

Peaceful protests can serve a divine purpose. The Protestant Church is so named because it was a protest movement. Our nation was born in protest. The right to protest peacefully is enshrined in our country's Constitution.

The weapon of the peaceful protest is the poster with its word carefully chosen, cleverly crafted, and concisely written to get its point across. Before the protest begins, people often gather together in groups to make the signs they will carry during the march. They work together to come up with the right phrasing and designs they believe their placards should have.

This is precisely the context for our scripture lesson for today, which is taken from the second chapter of the Book of Habakkuk. The prophet Habakkuk and God are making ready to participate in a demonstration for social justice. They intend to use the medium of words to get their message across. God wants Habakkuk to get out his poster board, paints, and markers to make signs. "Write the vision," God says, "make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it." God then goes on to dictate what the posters should say. These are the signs God wants carried at the protest.

There is a vision!

Note the present tense. God is not an old myth, some forgotten relic from a long ago horizon in the past. God is active here and now in the midst of people's lives and their nation's struggles.

Two factors trouble Habakkuk at the start of his book. One factor that troubled him was the difficulty he saw around him in the country he loved. He saw destruction. He saw violence. He saw wrong getting away scot free. The other factor that troubled him, and it troubled him even more than the first, was the absence of God. There was this terrible mess all around, ruinous to everything good and lovely and right, and God seemed far away. Habakkuk did not see God doing anything. He did not hear God saying anything.

It is to these twin factors that the first placard speaks. This poster tells of God presence in the present tense, and it affirms that God has complete mastery over the situation. It is not chaos that is ruling, but God. There is a vision. God knows what God is doing.

Now this is the Bible's message from beginning to end. Go near the start of the Bible and you will find the Book of Exodus. In the Book of Exodus you will find the people of God suffering under the horrors of slavery and oppression in Egypt. The powerful in the Egyptian empire are beating those Hebrews and killing their children. Right in the middle of that God holds a sign: the burning bush. From the burning bush there comes the message to Moses, "Take off your shoes, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (see Ex. 3:5) This madness of oppression and violence is holy ground because God is present right in the midst of it.

That is the front of the Bible. Come now to the back of it, to the Book of Revelation. I suspect you may not quite have the text but I know you have the music. It's from Handel's *Messiah*, which many of you love. The famous "Hallelujah Chorus" is based directly on a verse from Revelation. It is far more than fine music. It is political theology. In the Book of Revelation, heaven tells the Christians hard-pressed and persecuted by the Romans, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns" (Rev. 19:6). It isn't evil that reigns or persecution or suffering or death. It is the Lord God who reigns, right here and right now.

Come back, then, to the Book of Habakkuk. The prophet sees at the start of his book only violence and destruction and wrong and trouble on every side. But now! Write this as a placard, Habakkuk. There is a vision! God is here. God is in the present tense. God is alive and at work, and the work of God shall surely be done.

That is the first poster God wants Habakkuk to create. I pass now to a second.

Evil will not last!

Habakkuk's concern at the beginning of his book is a concern shared by many of our hymn writers. Maltbie Babcock saw "the wrong seems oft so strong."¹ James Russell Lowell noticed that the cause of evil prospers and that it seems truth is forever on the scaffold while wrong is forever on the throne.² And Longfellow once heard the bells of Christmas day but came to find something happened to drown the carol and mock the song "Of peace on earth, good-will to men."³

That was just Habakkuk's mood. He saw, in his first chapter, that justice never prevails, that wickedness surrounds righteousness, and that what passes for justice in the land is often perverted (Hab. 1:2-4).

¹ "This Is My Father's World," *The Pilgrim Hymnal* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1958), #485.

² "Once To Every Man and Nation," *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, #441.

³ "Christmas Bells," in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poems and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2000), p. 475-476.

But now he learns God wants him to draw up this placard: Evil will not last! God says the arrogant will not endure and evil will not survive. Later in chapter 2 of Habakkuk there is a series of stanzas that begin with the same words. Each stanza starts out, "Alas for you." The Today's English Version translates it, "You are doomed." Alas for you who keep what isn't yours (2:6), alas for you who do evil (2:9), alas for you who cause bloodshed (2:12), alas for you who take advantage of your neighbors (2:15). You seek glory and grab for honor now, God says, but you will come to shame (2:16). You have made innocent people drink from the cup of your wrath, but "the cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory." (2:16) God's message to Habakkuk is that evil is doomed and that the glory of the Lord will so prevail that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14).

We have seen two signs the Lord wishes be carried in the protest: There is a vision! And Evil will not last! I pass to a third.

Wealth is treacherous!

Note that the text does not say that wealth is bad. It does not say that at all. We know wealth isn't bad. We have seen what wealth can do in the hands of a righteous person. In the hands of a righteous person, wealth can bless and untold number of people. It can build hospitals, libraries, parks, and schools.

In my hometown there once lived a man named Edwin F. Deicke. Mr. Deicke was wealthy by any town's standards, I think; certainly he was wealthy in ours. One of his farms was just down the road from our farm. When I graduated from high school, I was awarded the Edwin F. Deicke Scholarship. My summer job when I was in college and seminary was as a laborer in Deicke Park. Mr. Deicke had donated over 20 acres to our village to use as a park, and it was beautiful. When I went to Bensenville to spend my seminary intern year as a chaplain at the Bensenville Home Society and made my first hospital call on a resident who was a patient at Elmhurst hospital, what did I see when I walked into the hospital lobby? A portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Deicke. They had made a contribution to the nursing department. When I was ordained, Mr. Deicke, who was a member of our church, wrote me a warm and wonderful letter I still have in my possession. Wealth was not treacherous in Mr. Deicke's hand. He handled it righteously.

But wealth can become dangerous when it becomes greed. Greed, when asked, "How much is enough?" always answers, "Just a little bit more." God, through Habakkuk, likens greed to death. Death is never satisfied with the number who have already died. Death always wants one more, and then another and another and another (2:5).

God wants this placard about the treacherousness of greed to have a picture on it. It is a picture of a nest situated high and above somewhere where it is safe and far away from anything that would make it vulnerable. But, says God, those who live in this nest of greed have forfeited life (2:9, 10). The greedy are like death and are themselves dead. Nothing valuable can be kept through greed.

There is a vision! Evil will not last! Wealth is treacherous! Those three posters; there is a fourth.

The righteous shall live!

A verse from Habakkuk that is picked up happily in the New Testament reads, “the righteous live by their faith” (2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). That is to say, those who practice faith’s way of righteousness are the ones to truly attain life.

Here let “life” mean all the blessing and joy God wants people to have here and hereafter.⁴

As for what the ways of the righteous may be, look to Jesus, who practiced the ways of righteousness best. His example shows that the way of righteousness is the way of love where each person’s value is honored regardless of station or status. And his example shows that the way of righteousness is the way of service, which is the willingness of be inconvenienced for the good of another, even though they can do nothing for you in return. Live like that, and you will have life in full measure, with all the best money cannot buy.

God is in the midst of all we are going through. God is in the press of the crowd, the noise of the demonstrators, and the threats that arise from any growing danger. God carries signs into this melee. They say there is a vision, that evil will not last, that wealth is treacherous, and that the righteous shall live. Those are more than slogans cute in a crowd. They are principles to follow in a crisis.

⁴ Andrew Watterson Blackwood, Sr. Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library. Box 2: John’s Gospel, “Life = John’s Gospel,” p. 2