

It's Okay to Be Mad at God!

When I was serving at a different church, there was a saintly woman who wouldn't hurt a fly. She was so sweet and so kind. Her husband was a recovering alcoholic. She had stood by his side throughout their turbulent marriage, never outwardly complaining, always with a quiet presence.

She asked to see me one day and so we met one afternoon. She wanted to talk about her husband who was just recently diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. She was not her smiling, bubbly self. She wasn't even weepy. What she was, was angry! She was afraid to share her anger because as a good Christian woman, she thought she wouldn't be angry.

But there she was, letting it all out. She had stood by his side throughout all those drunken days and nights, never thinking of leaving because a Christ follower would never leave. When he finally got sober, they were beginning to rebuild their lives together and then he was diagnosed with cancer, and she was mad. She wanted to live life and not have to take care of someone who had brought her so much pain in her marriage. She felt like she was being selfish with her words and most of all, she was mortified that she was angry, because that's not how good Christians behave.

Life had dealt her some tough cards and she was sick and tired of it! I listened as best I could, and then shared with her Christ's anger in the temple and then also all of the prophets who shook their fists at God! She had never been told in her whole Christian walk that she had a right to be angry, that she had a right to question God.

In the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there is a scene where a poor slave named George Harris is bitterly numbering the woes afflicted on him and his fellow slaves by merciless slave owners. Particularly, he laments the fact that no matter what he does, he is always going to be a slave and his wife and children can be sold away from him at the whim of their master. He cries out, "They buy and sell us, they make trade of our heart's blood, and sweat and tears, and God lets them. He does. God lets them."

The prophet Habakkuk looked at the world through the eyes of a George Harris. Habakkuk saw the wicked prospering, the righteous suffering and God doing nothing. And he struggled to hold on to his faith. How can I square my faith in a God of justice with a world that is filled with injustice and horrible suffering.

I can relate to my parishioner, to George Harris and to Habakkuk and I suspect that you can, too. Habakkuk's questions and complaints are the deep concerns of our hearts. How do you square your faith in God with the facts of the world? This little prophet is for people oppressed and depressed by the ways of the world. This scripture helps us to live triumphantly in times of trouble, how to keep living and believing when there are pieces missing in life's puzzle. These first four verses explain the prophets' problem and the prophet's response, in words that resonate with our hearts.

So what is Habakkuk's problem? There doesn't seem to be any justice anywhere. He was prophesying during the last days of the southern kingdom of Judah, about 600 BC. The northern kingdom, Israel, had already gone into exile. That once proud and powerful nation had been reduced to a fourth rate power. They were stuck in a game of power between Assyria to the north and east of Judah and the nation of Egypt to the south and west. They were passed back and forth by whichever nation was in power at the time.

So there is chaos going on and as so often happens when a nation is in decline, this little country was experiencing moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Everywhere Habakkuk looked, he saw pretty much what you and I see when we look around at 21st Century America. "Violence and destruction are before me," he says in verse 3. Everywhere he looked he saw people taking advantage of each other, lying and stealing and cheating; people hurting each other with swords or words or money of whatever they had at hand.

As a result of this, he says, "there is strife and conflict abounds." Everybody was fighting everybody. It was every person for himself or herself. It was one seething mess of self-interest, a special interest group there against a special interest group here, this neighbor against that neighbor, conservatives versus liberals, Democrats against Republicans, The President, the Congress and the courts. "Strife and conflict abound."

In that atmosphere, he says, "The law is paralyzed." We know what that is about, don't we? When there is so much wrong, where do you start to make it right?

And then the prophet says, "Justice never prevails." think about it. In some African countries, dictators and rebels commit genocide. In the West Bank, Palestinians and Israelis riddle each other with bullets and rockets. And God lets them.

Here in the United States, drug dealers peddle death disguised as pleasure and God lets them. It seems like once a week you read about another mass shooting and God lets them. Greedy companies ruin the lives of thousands by closing factories and going off shore. And God lets them.

The church is filled with people who act like saints on Sunday and piranhas on Monday, living for possessions and prestige and power, while claiming to follow the principles of peace. And God lets them. God lets them.

Where is the God of justice? That is what Habakkuk cried in his little book. That was his response to what he saw in the culture around him. Where is the God of justice? Specifically, he asks, "How long, O God? I cry for help and you don't listen. I scream 'violence' but you don't save." All this evil and suffering goes on and on and on and God doesn't do anything.

How long, God? Is there no end, no answer, no justice? And why, God? Why do you make me look at in justice? Why do you tolerate wrong? You could do something, God. Why don't you?

Some of you may know the name of Eli Wiesel. He survived a Nazi concentration camp. He saw millions of his fellow Jews slaughtered in World War II. IN his book, "A Jew Today," Eli Wiesel turns to God and says, "Enough! Since you seem to approve of all these persecutions,

all these outrages, have it your way. Let the world go on without Jews. We've had it. We quit. Enough!"

That's the temptation we face as we look at the facts of injustice and suffering. We are tempted to say to God, "Enough! We quit. You will have to go on without me, because I no longer believe."

But that is precisely what Habakkuk the prophet did not do. Oh yes, he cries out to God. He complains to God. He does what some of us have wanted to do in the last weeks and months; go straight to God and question the way things are, the way God runs things, and ask for an accounting of the way the world is.

Habakkuk asks his "how longs" and his "whys" but he doesn't give up. He doesn't say, "Enough God, I quit." What he does do is he climbs up a watch tower? Sounds kind of weird, right? Habakkuk is going up to his watchtower to hear what God will say about his questions. He probably thinks he is going to be chewed out. "How dare you question the almighty God." But that is not what happens! God welcomes his sincere questions.

God tells Habakkuk to write down a vision. That seems about as helpful as shouting into the wind. But wait – we become what we think, don't we? When we fill our thoughts with anger and frustration we tend to spiral downward. When we bristle at the feeling that others are getting their share and we're getting cheated, we spiral downward.

When we struggle to articulate our hope, and share it as a vision, we can spiral upwards. The martyred South American bishop Dom Helder Camara once said, "When we dream alone, it is only a dream. But when we dream together, it is the beginning of reality."

What would happen if we metaphorically climbed up a watch tower so we might see the entire world and not just our own point of view? Could we imagine what justice for the whole globe might look like? A broader scope also considers time as well as space and reminds us that we are part of long lineages – of blood, land, choice and tradition. And that God's perspective takes a long view. As Rabbi Tarfon says in the Talmud, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to desist from it."

What is your vision? What is your dream for our world? We need to write it down. That's what God said to Habakkuk. And that's what God says to us: Write the vision down. Post the vision on a billboard so distracted drivers and preoccupied commuters won't have to stop or even slow down and look closely, but can still see it and know it.

Let me encourage you at home to write your vision down on a large sheet of paper. What is God telling you to do? What is that thing that you want manifested in your life. In just a moment we will be celebrating the sacrament of holy communion. You might have noticed some blank pieces of paper around the sanctuary. After you have received communion, please take a few moments to write down a vision you have for this church. Write it big enough so that someone running can read it. And as God has promised in our scripture, If it seems low in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come right on time. May it be so. Amen.

