

“Make it Plain”

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 6, 2019, Proper 22, World Wide Communion Sunday, dedicated to blessed memory of Helen Wilson, to my wife and all Jews across the world who pray in these Holy Days for Atonement of Sins and for blessings to begin a new year with a clean slate, to all the prophets of God through the ages and always to the glory of God!

“Make it Plain”

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; II Timothy 1:1-14;

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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From innocent childhood queries to complex university discussions, life is filled with all kinds of questions. Many of us ask “how,” “when,” “why,” “what” and “where” (all the time) as we probe beneath an unsatisfactory surface seeking answers to the questions of life, meaning, the universe and our human

condition. But not all questions have answers wrapped-up, neatly tied and packed in a way that satisfies our thirst and hunger for “more” and “deeper.” These unanswered interrogations bring more questions (or maybe the exact same question over and over) creating more questions and nagging, sometimes spirit-destroying doubt. Some of us choose to live with our doubts, ignoring them and moving on with life in spite of doubts. Others become cynical and hardened. But there are still others, who reject those options and continue to ask, to seek, to question, to query and look for answers – Why, what, where, when, how?

The prophet Habakkuk was such a man. He was troubled by what he observed all around him. He asked God difficult questions. These questions were not merely intellectual exercises or bitter complaints. Habakkuk saw a dying world and it broke his heart. He saw injustice and he was appalled. He wanted answers: *“Why is there evil in the world?”* *“Why do the wicked seem to be winning?”* He pushed and probed and questioned God. He boldly and confidently took his complaints directly to God. And God answered with proofs and predictions.

In less than 1400 words, in three short chapters, God and Habakkuk have it out. The prophet fires away with penetrating questions. God answers with deep answers. In chapter 1:2-4 the prophet cries:

“God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head. And what are you doing about it?”

Can any of you relate to this prophet’s cries to God?! I hope so. I certainly can. Mayhem seems to reign. Evil seems at ease. Justice seems a joke. And what is God doing about it?

God answers. God says: *“LOOK! I am about to use the godless nations to punish your people. The Babylonians and Chaldeans will overrun you. They will sweep in like the wind and wipe out the wicked.”* While this is not the answer the prophet was looking for, God will use the godless and mighty enemies to do away with the leaders who are so filled with sin they are blinded by their evil ways.

I can certainly relate to this in our current day situation. How about you? Doesn’t it feel like the godless often heartless people rule?

Let’s look close – at the universal church in our times...

We find ourselves in the church today and across the world caught up with internal struggles and problems that are whittling away (and in some places destroying) deeply held

values of justice, peace, righteousness, truth, faith, fidelity, trust, kindness, generosity, hope, joy and grace.

For example, how can anyone trust a church whose leaders have betrayed trusts and turned against and hurt the most vulnerable in their midst? Or, how can you follow church leaders who ignore truth and are used as pawns for political gain? They sell their souls for single issues and destroy our neighbors in need while in the process of making deals with the devil. Watch out for the Babylonians. They are still around – found in our own land and in our own time. They wear different suits but they are cut out of the same fabric.

God's first answer doesn't sit well with Habakkuk. So, the prophet fires a second volley of questions challenging God in a new way. He questions how God can send evildoers to do God's good works.

He asks: "God, how can you choose the Babylonians for your judgment work? Rock-Solid God, you gave them the job of discipline? But you can't be serious! You can't condone evil! So why don't you do something about this? Why are you silent now? This outrage! Evil men swallow up the righteous and you stand around and watch!"

The prophet is really struggling with God. You heard it. How can God use evil ones to do good works? How can God allow for the unjust to prosper? How? Why? What is God thinking?

God is not silent. God answers a second time. *"Write this. Write what you see. Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run. This vision-message is a witness pointing to what's coming. It aches for the coming - it can hardly wait! And it doesn't lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come right on time.*

Now...Look at that man, bloated by self-importance - full of himself but soul-empty. But the person in right standing before God through loyal and steady believing is fully alive, really alive."

In other words, "The Righteous Live by Faith." In BIG BLOCK LETTERS God delivers God's answer:

THE RIGHTEOUS LIVE BY FAITH.

This is God making things plain. Five words – **The Righteous live by faith.** It is about faith.

Do you have faith? Do you believe in God to deliver you in the midst of pain, suffering and struggles? As a person of faith, do you do "the right thing?" Do you stand before God with loyalty and steady belief and live your life fully? Do you get up in the morning and sink into despair when the wicked seemingly prevail in the land and in your life, or do you rise to serve and find God alive and well in your daily walk? Or more simply, do you enter a room, a conversation, a relationship and see all that is wrong or do you enter a room, a conversation, a relationship and see all that is right? Do you live into the rightness of life with others and God or do you find fault and simply yield to the judgement of others and God?

The prophet is himself a righteous man. He ascends the wall. He stands upon the wall and looks out and listens for God as God answers his complaints. Up on the wall, God points the prophet to the horizon of hope. And the horizon of hope is filled by faith. He holds up his sign from God – **THE RIGHTEOUS LIVE BY FAITH!**

People who live in right relationship with God get this. They understand that faith leads them forward – every day, step by step – they live boldly and they give boldly. They live and give with gratitude and joy guiding them. They are able to live, breathe, move and have their being as women and men of faith. Theirs is a faith in God to deliver them through all kinds of evil and life challenges. Theirs is a faith in God’s presence within people. Theirs is a faith that points them forward on land, on sea, in the air, and finally there is a faith that delivers them to heaven. But these righteous ones are not so “heavenly minded people they are no earthly good.” No. These righteous ones are earthly-minded people who live with the heavenly goodness of faith.

Like Habakkuk, **The Righteous who Live by Faith** are not mindless automatons. They are people who question things. They question God BUT they listen for answers and seek a way forward. They are thoughtful God-people.

THE RIGHTEOUS LIVE BY FAITH. These words which Habakkuk wrote in 2:4 in large print while he stood up high to show everyone became central for Christian writers and all of

Christ's followers in the early church. They must have read the sign posted high on the wall!

The Apostle Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. The writer of Hebrews quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in Hebrews 10:38 right before he launches into his beautiful chapter on faith. Martin Luther would start the Protestant Reformation driven by the vision proclaimed in Habakkuk 2:4. He wrote in the margins of his Bible in Romans 1:17 the Latin word, "*sola*" or "only." Luther's foundational belief that drove the Reformation was the doctrine of justification by faith – **ALONE**. God's word in Habakkuk has been seen, heard, and absorbed by many who follow Christ for almost 2000 years.

In time, God delivered Habakkuk and his people. The Babylonians rose and destroyed and fell and retreated. Justice would eventually return to Judah and Israel. **Justice comes slowly, but Justice ALWAYS comes.**

Today, as we come to Christ's table of grace, let me *make it plain*. **BE Righteous** (not self-righteous). Be in Right-relationship with God. **And... Live by Faith!** Amen.