

October 2, 2016

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Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

### **Make it Plain**

Tuesday is the feast of St. Francis, who is remembered, among other things, as a friend to the animals. Give your pets a hug, or a kiss (if you do that). There are no dogs or dog jokes in the sermon today.

There's a large section on the exterior of this church building, the wall behind us, next to the parking lot, facing Pulaski, there's a sizeable section of that wall without any windows. It's just a sheet of brick, an open canvas of stone—but it wasn't always blank. Some people here have been here long enough to remember this. Some years ago there used to be writing on that side of the church—not graffiti, it was done by the church. The writing said the name of the church and a message of welcome, it was painted on the brick in great tall letters, plenty large enough to be seen from street. Someone in the church back then must have read today's first lesson and been inspired. Someone must have read that part of the book of the prophet Habakkuk that says: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner can read it." Make it plain, so that a runner can read it—so that someone passing by at a pace can take it in. Sound and simple guidelines, signage 101: it has to catch the eye and be readable. Years ago someone here thought that, but then the paint flaked and the building needed to be tuck-pointed and the words got sanded off.

Well, we're thinking again about getting some identifier up there on that blank part of the wall, we're thinking of taking advantage of that tablet of stone. It's an opportunity to say to anyone running down Pulaski (or more likely to anyone stuck in traffic on Pulaski) "We are a church here." And so we've been talking to different sign makers, and considering different materials and various designs. You can imagine the varieties of input, and we'll be getting yet more, but one thing everyone agrees on, about a sign, if we agree to do it, it needs to be plain—not plain as in unattractive, but plain as in immediately comprehensible, eye-catchingly clear. Make it plain.

"Make it plain," is something you hear not just about signs, and not just outside of churches, but inside of churches, in the context of worship. You may hear it in churches that draw on a preaching tradition which includes overt dialogue, sermons that include cadenced conversations between preacher and congregation, call and response. The preacher makes a point, and the congregation may answer back with a "Yes, Lord." Or a "Say it!" or a "Thank you Jesus." Here in this church, every once in a while you give me a firm "Amen." Different communities have different ways of expressing themselves in worship. So also, what in this congregation might be a raised eyebrow or a furrowed brow, in another congregation might be "Make it plain." That's a cue to the preacher, a cue that the congregation is not sure what they are hearing, or that it needs to be said again, repeated, emphasized, "Make it plain."

"Make it plain," as it says in the book of the prophet Habakkuk, a book that itself is structured as call and response. The prophet Habakkuk is the one who is speaking first, calling out crying out, the heading in my Bible says this section is "the prophet's complaint." Habakkuk is addressing God—and not in a pious way, or not in the way piety can often be portrayed, reverently restrained, speaking in hushed tones. I'm not sure where that picture of piety comes from, but it's not from the Bible. In the Bible, and especially in the prophets, conversations with

God include a lot more noise and are a lot more candid, a lot more honest, a lot more raw. Habakkuk says, “Lord, How long must I cry out to you? Why aren’t you listening? How can this violence continue? Won’t you do something?” Habakkuk says that all around him is destruction, wrongdoing, contention, strife. Habakkuk says that justice never prevails, that the law has become twisted, perverted.

Habakkuk calls what he says a complaint, says he is calling on God to answer concerning his complaint, but what Habakkuk says is also much more a complaint. Habakkuk’s call is a deeply religious expression, it is piety in the vortex of suffering, it is the cry for God in the absence of God, it is lament. As South African theologian Denise Ackerman says, “Lament is the sound suffering makes when it recovers its voice.” This first part of this reading from Habakkuk, this cry, is so important for a church to hear, and for a church to say. Church people are not Pollyannas. We hear and have words we speak of pain, anger, frustration, grief. We acknowledge and name all the ways that the world is not as it should be. With the prophet Habakkuk, we cry out to God in lament, “O Lord how long?” How many more school shootings? How many more black men killed by police? How many more murders in Chicago in this year? Justice is not prevailing. The law is becoming twisted. We cry out in lament.

God cries out in lament, too. God cries out in lament from the cross, the vortex of injustice. God cries out from the cross, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me.” God cries out in lament at all the crosses we continue to plant, all our ongoing crucifixions: gun violence and racism and poverty. God cries out in lament, and God responds. God says to us, as God says to Habakkuk: “There is still a vision for the appointed time, it speaks to the end and does not lie.” God says, “Write the vision. Make it plain.” It is God who says those words. God’s reply to our call, calls for response from us: “Write the vision. Make it plain.”

God is not giving us an essay assignment. God is not giving us a lined notebook and a complicated prompt. We don’t have to worry about being creative; we can copy off of God. God has written the vision for us. God wrote it in the Bible, in the law and the prophets, some of it first written on stone tablets. And God wrote it yet more concretely in the person of Jesus: in the life he lived for others, in the death he died for all, in the resurrected life he makes possible. In Jesus, God has written, has given us a vision of the end, a triumphant end that will surely come—and that even now we may live. God wrote the vision on our hearts—hearts that once were made of stone, but now hearts made of flesh, hearts that may love. God is not telling us to go write a visionary essay but God is giving us an assignment: make God’s vision plain, make it plain by how we live.

We make God’s vision plain when we preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words, as St. Francis may have said. We make God’s vision plain when we live the prayer attributed to St. Francis, “Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is discord, union. Where there is doubt, faith... Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.”

We are called to make God’s vision plain. Even more than great big letters on the side of our building, how important is it for the world to see us as signs. In a world full of violence, and injustice, and suffering, how much we need to make God’s vision plain, so that someone running by, or someone running away, or someone stuck in traffic, or someone stuck in pain, so that they could see us, and it would catch their eye, it would so attractive and clear. They would see us and say, “That is a church. .”