

We Believe: Obedience Leading to Justice  
Habakkuk 2:1-8. 18-20; Romans 3:22-24  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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He's a standard feature in cartoons. Maybe you've seen him yourself. I'm talking about the guy (could be a woman, but usually it's a guy) carrying a sign that says, "The End Is Near". Usually, in the cartoons anyway, it's a fellow with a long beard and wild hair who looks like either a hippie or a prophet or both. Do you know who I mean? Can you picture this guy?

And if we enlarge the definition of this guy a little bit, maybe you can picture a doom and gloom neighbor, or a relative who is worried all the time, or a colleague who can't ever seem to find any good news to share...

So what is your response if you see someone like that?

Maybe you think, "Oh, great. Another crackpot. Where do these people come from, anyway..."

Maybe you think, "Wow, you know, I'm afraid that he's right. Maybe I should leave the neighborhood..." or adopt whatever course of action the protester advocates.

Or maybe you are an eternal optimist, and you consider the sign and then you say, "Nah, that may be a problem for some folks, but not me. We can fix it. No problem."

I can't prove this, of course, but I have a hunch that the prophet Habakkuk is the model for this stereotype character. After all, isn't that what we read in chapter 2? "Write the vision...make it plain on tablets so a runner can read it...it speaks of the end...it will not delay." "The End Is Near", indeed! What is he saying?

Simply put, the prophet is saying that the world is not the way that God intends it to be – but that God is acting in and through history to set things straight.

In recent weeks, we've been talking about what Presbyterians believe. Our denomination has been, and will be, in the news, and so it seemed appropriate that we who worship as Presbyterians understand a little about what makes us the way we are. Last week, I read you a portion of our church's Constitution, *The Book of Order*, which reads:

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (USA) expresses the faith of the reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1) the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation  
[remember – we did this two weeks ago!]

2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God. [we did this last week]

And today, I'll share another point from that same section:

4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God. [G-5.0500]

I love the way that is worded – the *recognition* of tendency to idolatry and tyranny...in other words, our constitution is saying that everyone knows that given half a chance, human beings will find a way to get lost, to do harm to ourselves or each other, and to walk away from God's best.

The early church talked about this idea in what became known as the doctrine of original sin. John Calvin, the founding father of Presbyterianism, referred to it as "total depravity". The idea is that in and of ourselves, we are flawed creatures. We cannot create meaning and purpose for ourselves, and we are unable to choose good on our own.

Years ago I was in a series of Bible studies on basic Christian beliefs, and after one of them, my friend Suzy came up from the room where she was babysitting all of the pre-schoolers. She said, "Dave, if anyone ever questions the idea of the total depravity of humanity, have them spend an hour in that room. Why is it that you don't have to teach kids to be bad? It's like they're born knowing how to be selfish and greedy and mean, and we have to teach them otherwise."

This theme is picked up in Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, where he simply says, "Of course, everyone has sinned. Everyone has fallen short of God's glory. We are all broken and bent by the power of sin in our lives."

I want to say that it's not just the Church who has noticed this. Take a look at the arts of the last century. In the visual arts, there was the Dada movement, which held essentially that logic and reason led people into the carnage of World War. The antidote, then, is to reject logic and authority and embrace anarchy and nihilism. William Golding wrote *The Lord of the Flies* in 1954, and if you've ever read that novel, you'll remember how vividly he portrays human society as hopeless and in need of some sort of "adult" to show up and save us from ourselves. In the 1970's the New Wave band DEVO was formed following the shootings at Kent State University in Ohio. Their name comes from the concept of "de-evolution" – that is to say that human beings are actually getting more primitive as time goes by. In the 1980's, Jeremy Rifkin wrote a book called *Entropy*, which contended that humans are wasting resources at an increasing rate and thereby dooming human civilization. Not long ago, Jared Diamond explored the same questions in his book, *Guns, Germs, & Steel*. And if you want to get a really depressing view of human nature, then just go see *The Departed* or (any other film) by Martin Scorsese. This Oscar-winning film is all about the

fact that nobody is good and everybody dies. I hope I didn't spoil it for you.

So no matter what we call it – original sin, total depravity, De-evolution, Entropy...what do we do? If all of creation is fallen and if we cannot get up on our own...what is our response?

Some Christians have taught that when confronted with a world that is as twisted and evil as our own, the only appropriate response is to hide out somewhere and wait for Jesus to show up and set things straight. These brothers and sisters of ours would say that we don't have any right to expect anything different from the world – it's a sinful place, after all – and so the best we can do is to hunker down and wait for Jesus to come and take us all away. There is no point in trying to effect much change, because Satan's power here is too great. So we make sure that we are saved, we talk to the people we love about being saved, and we wait for heaven.

That has not been the approach favored by Presbyterian Christians, however. When we are confronted with a world that is created by God for God's purposes and then has fallen into sin, we seek to partner with God and follow him in the process of healing and hope. In other words, when we are at our best, when Presbyterians see a world that is broken, we try to change it.

When we are at our best, Presbyterians refuse to accept a world where 27 million human beings are enslaved...where 16,000 children died in the last 24 hours from hunger-related causes...where so much of our "human achievement" comes only through incredible harm to the creation itself...where neighbors go to bed in fear...where children are regarded as inconvenient and worthless. We live in the same world as do the Dadaists, DEVO, Rifken, Scorsese and the rest, but we claim, with Habakkuk, that God isn't finished with the world yet and that he intends to use people like us to bring about his purposes of healing and wholeness.

And how do we do that?

We recognize the power of sin in our own lives. Re-read what Paul says in Romans. That's us. We are helpless to choose good outside of what Christ has already done for us. I am a sinner. I am broken. I am fallen. So we don't pretend that everything is honky-dory and then move on; instead, we band together and say, "Wow, things are tough! If we're going to change the world, we're going to have to stick together."

I don't know exactly what that looks like for you. I know that every Christian hero of mine that has been able to bear fruit of change and hope is involved in a series of relationships that will help that person remember the tremendous power of sin and temptation in our lives. Who knows what you are like? Who knows what you are capable of? Who knows what you secretly wish for? I don't know if you do this in a Cross-Trainers staff meeting, a one-on-one relationship, or in a small group, but I can tell you this: unless you are serious about making sure that you are being honest and real with someone else, you will not have the power to overcome the sinful nature with which every one of us in this room struggles every day of our lives. I'm here to tell you that changing

the world starts with an awareness that the change must be rooted in your heart and your actions.

As you are aware of the power of sin in your own life, then don't be paralyzed by it, but instead seek justice in the world. Habakkuk lists the ways in which his culture had abandoned God and grown fat on injustice. What is our culture like? Can you dig around a little bit? If you have a satellite dish or digital cable, let me encourage you to watch the BBC world news once in a while for a different perspective on the world. If you like to surf the web, check out [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net), the website for the Sojourners community. Ask yourself "why" a lot. Why are bananas, grown thousands of miles away, cheaper than apples, grown right here? How do those big box stores get the prices so low? I'm not pushing a specific political agenda here, I'm suggesting that much of our life is connected with justice issues, but we don't ever think about it.

At the end of the day, the best response to the sign that Habakkuk is carrying and the hard news that Paul presents to us is also found in Habakkuk: "He whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by faith." Elizabeth Achtemier explains what Habakkuk means by faithfulness in her commentary on this book:

Faithfulness means placing one's whole life in God's hands and trusting him to fulfill it, despite all outward and inward circumstances; despite all personal sin and guilt; despite all psychological and social and physical distortions. Faithfulness is life by God's power rather than one's own; and therefore it is truly life, because it draws its vitality from the living God who is the source of life.<sup>1</sup>

The end is near. We are in a bad news situation. But our response is neither escapism nor alarmism: we seek to align our lives with God's intentions for us by giving ourselves wholly to God; and then we use the strength and the energy God gives us to be a blessing to those around us. How? Through Cross-Trainers; partnership with Malawians; activism in Darfur; fighting racism on our own street. But we are called to do something. To change the world in ways that God lays out. That's what we believe, and on our really good days, that's what Presbyterians do. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Interpretation Commentary on Nahum – Malachi* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), p. 46)