

“Call and Response”

“I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.”

Most businesses have some form of a customer service department that handles issues, concerns, and complaints that consumers may have in their interactions with that business. For physical stores such as supermarkets or department stores, the customer service department is a physical location within the establishment where customers can speak with a company representative face to face. For services such as hydro, cable, and telephone, customer service usually involves making a phone call to a representative in the company office to address the issue at hand. For online businesses, customer service is usually a part of the website on which a customer makes purchases, and is invited to address their concerns through either an online chat feature or by leaving a message with the promise that the concern will be addressed in a timely manner. But no matter how we find ourselves dealing with these various customer service departments, at some point we have found ourselves in the frustrating position of being put on hold, with a robotic voice promising that “your call is important to us; please stay on line for the next available representative.” While some companies do answer their calls in a timely manner, others make customers wait for what feels like an eternity, almost as if their intention is to make the customer so frustrated that they will hang up before the manner they need addressed can be communicated. At times like these our calls do not get the response that we expect or require.

I like to think that I am a patient person and try to be reasonable when I am dealing with delays in having a customer service issue resolved; but there are times when I become so frustrated with being put on hold for an extended period of time that I find out where the company has an office and go there in person, standing in line and waiting until my issue is resolved. It is at times like these that I can resonate with the prophet Habakkuk when he declares that “*I will stand at my watch post and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint.*” (Habakkuk 2:1). The book of Habakkuk is one of the Twelve Prophets of the Old Testament that are at times referred to as the “Minor Prophets,” not because their works are of less importance than the “Major Prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) but because their

books are shorter than the voluminous works of the latter group. Habakkuk is like many of these prophets of Hebrew Scripture in that his central concern is for justice, which is solidly in the tradition of the prophets of Israel. But unlike the other prophets in the biblical canon, Habakkuk gives prominent attention to a persistent and troubling problem that challenges this prophet's confidence in God's justice: the perseverance of injustice in the world. The problem of maintaining belief in God's just rule despite an unjust world is a central theme in the book; *"no other prophet confronts the issue of a just God and an unjust world in the direct and forceful way that Habakkuk does."* (Theodore Hiebert).

Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk or the date of the book that bears his name. One clue is the mention of the "Chaldeans" early in the first chapter (*"For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize buildings not their own."* – 1:6). This name is used by biblical historians and prophets to refer to the Neo-Babylonian Empire that was ruled by Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC), the king who sacked Jerusalem in 586 BC and destroyed it completely in 586 BC. Habakkuk's announcement of the Chaldean invasion places the dating of the book @605-604 BC, the fifth year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, one of a long line of corrupt and incompetent kings whose poor leadership led to the demise of the nation.

The central question that arises in Habakkuk – the persistence of injustice – logically arises from the firsthand experience of the Chaldean invasion that the prophet has experienced; *"Habakkuk's career and fervent struggle with divine justice are to be viewed, therefore, against the backdrop of the final, turbulent days of Jerusalem and its great Davidic dynasty."* (Hiebert). While other biblical prophets proclaim the word of the Lord to God's people (*"Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment ..."* – Amos 2:6), the book of Habakkuk is structured in the form of a debate between the prophet and God, with the prophet using the language of lament to bring his complaints before God in the expectation that God will answer the cries of the prophet that echo the cries of God's people in this time of national crisis. The unique nature of this book can be seen at its beginning, which states that this is *"the oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw."* (1:1). While other prophetic books customarily begin with the facts of publication such as the title, author, and date (*"The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah."* – Isaiah 1:1), the opening of Habakkuk provides a name and occupation but no date. It describes what is to follow as an "oracle," which derives from the verb "lift up" or "raise" and may refer to a communication brought to public attention, a message lifted in public. The custom of referring to such a message

having been “seen” may derive from visionary experiences traditionally associated with the prophets (*“An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.”* – Nahum 1:1).

The opening speech of the prophet resembles a psalm of lament, psalms which *“generally begin with a direct address to God before turning to a complaint”* (Tyler Mayfield). Laments are psalms in which the people cry out to God amid their present distress, asking how long they must suffer before God will hear their cries and respond to their pleas (*“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!”* – Psalm 130:1-2). There is often a tone of desperation and complaint in these laments; Habakkuk begins his address by asking *“O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?”* (1:2); such words are reminiscent of the desperate cries of the psalm that Jesus quotes in his dying moments on the Cross:

- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.” – Psalm 22:1-2.

Habakkuk’s lament arises from his complaint about the perversion of justice in Judean society; the injustice the prophet deplores is best understood as the abuse of power in the administration of King Jehoiakim, a king who *“did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, just as all his ancestors had done”* (2 Kings 23:37). The exploitation of the poor and less privileged by the rich was a fundamental concern among Israel’s prophets who condemned the people *“because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, [therefore] you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.”* (Amos 5:11). Habakkuk cries out that *“destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise”* (1:3); these terms are used by other prophets to describe the ruthless accumulation of wealth by political officials (*“Thus says the Lord God: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression and do what is just and right. Cease your evictions of my people, says the Lord God.”* – Ezekiel 45:9). “Strife and contention” derive from the legal sphere of Judean society brought on by irresponsible litigation or failure to administer justice properly, the result being that *“the law becomes slack, and justice never prevails”* (1:4). The prophet laments that *“the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes forth perverted,”* a society in which justice is absent, and the law is ineffectual. While it is human beings that are responsible for such abuses,

Habakkuk's words of lament are addressed to God; *"With his opening words, Habakkuk accuses God directly of being inattentive and inactive."* (Hoebert).

- "Prophetic lament offers an assessment of the prophet's current feelings about life. He sees violence all around him and wonders how long God relates to such destruction. The prophet notes that he has been crying for help without an answer. His language can be unsettling because of its authenticity and because many of us have been taught not to question God. Yet, here, the prophet boldly questions God's response and presence." – Mayfield.

Like many of us who have grown weary waiting for a response to our calls to have our complaints answered, Habakkuk goes on to announce that he is going to position himself in a place where he cannot be ignored until his complaints have been addressed: *"I will stand at my watch post and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me and what he will answer concerning my complaint."* (2:1). The prophet describes the challenge he has posed to God and to traditional theology as a "complaint" (*takahot*, "argument, reproof, rebuke"). This indicates that the prophet is more than a mere complainer or malcontent; *"he is a debater in an argument, one who stands in judgment of traditional views about God's ways in the world."* (Hoebert). Yet while his words and attitude may appear disrespectful and even blasphemous before God, there are in the tradition of lament in which God gives the people the very language to bring their cries of woe and complaint before the Lord in the confidence that God will not only hear these words of desperation but will respond to their calls and answer God's people:

- "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame." – Psalm 22:3-5.

While we are not told how long Habakkuk stands at his station awaiting the response to his call, we are told that the Lord did indeed answer him. The Lord instructs the prophet to *"write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it"* (2:2). The message that the prophet is to receive is not meant for him alone but for all the people; the written record of the vision will serve as an official affidavit or guarantee to verify the trustworthiness of the vision's content (*"Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever."* – Isaiah 30:8). The vision is thus described as a reliable pledge that God will act in the future: *"For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks to the end and does not lie"* (2:3). Although its fulfillment may appear

to be delayed, the vision will not prove false; it will inevitably come to pass: *“If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”*

- “The present moment may appear destructive and violent to the prophet, but a new moment is coming. This is not the whole story. The wicked will not get the final word. Violence is not the only option ... God speaks of a forthcoming vision, with few details. Yet, it is a response to the prophet’s concerns. It is not silence. God has heard the cry of this prophet.” – Mayfield.

God’s final word to Habakkuk is a word of assurance for those who place their trust in the Lord: *“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faithfulness.”* (2:4). At a time when the wicked appear to be in control and God’s intention to reestablish justice has not become a reality, Habakkuk is called in the interim to trust God’s assurances and remain faithful. *“The righteous realize that God indeed has a vision – a dream – for the world. They wait and work for this dream’s arrival among us.”* (Mayfield).

While the writings of Habakkuk may be obscure to even the most seasoned Bible reader, the message of this prophet is a reminder to us that no matter how challenging our circumstances may be, we live in the sure and certain knowledge that God is with us always and that in the end God will accomplish all that God wills *“on earth as it is in heaven.”* While laments give us language to cry out to God in the midst of our deepest moments of despair, it also reminds us that our words do not go unanswered but that when we call out to God, God will respond to our cries and assure us of God’s loving presence. The prophet Jeremiah shared the words of the Lord that taught God’s people to *“call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”* (Jeremiah 33:3). At a time of national mourning, the author of Lamentations reminds God’s people that *“the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22-24). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his audience to *“ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.”* (Matthew 7:7-8).

- “You must learn to pray and not sit alone or lie about, hanging your head and shaking it, brooding over your thoughts, worrying about how you can escape, and looking at nothing but yourself and your sad and painful condition ... God wills that you should be too weak to bear and overcome such trouble, in order

that you may learn to find strength in him and that he may be praised through his strength in you. This is how Christians are made!” – Martin Luther.

Unlike calls we make to customer service representatives that may or may not be answered, we know that when we call out to God, we will always receive a response from God. We know that because we have been claimed as God’s beloved children through the waters of Holy Baptism that we can bring *“everything to God in prayer”* – not only our words of praise and thanksgiving, but also our cries of despair and even our complaints and laments. God is always ready to hear us, always ready to respond, always ready to reassure us that *“though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”*

- “Prayer is not introspection. It is not a scrupulous, inward-looking analysis of our own thoughts and feelings but a careful attentiveness to the One who invites us to an unceasing conversation. Prayer is the presentation of our thoughts – reflective thoughts as well as daydreams and night dreams – to our loving Father so that God can see them and respond to them with divine compassion. Prayer is the joyful affirmation that God knows our minds and hearts and that nothing is hidden from God.” – Henri Nouwen.

We may have reasons to be skeptical when a recorded voice seeks to assure us that “your call is important to us,” but we need never doubt that our calls to God are important to our Lord who is present with us always and desires that we have the fullness of abundance that God desires for all God’s children. When we call out to God, God will always respond to us, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.