

Good Book Club Preaching Series

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 137

Zechariah 8:1-8

Mark 1:29-39

This week in the Good Book Club, we have taken up with some of the minor prophets, specifically Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. We call these guys “minor” prophets not because they matter less than any of the others, but simply because their books are short compared to the major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Think of it this way: the minor prophets were like us Episcopalians, always writing short sermons. The majors? Well, I guess they were more like everyone else!

As we have been re-reading the words of these prophets over the past few weeks (both the minors and the majors), I have found myself dwelling on two simple words... words that occur over and over, words that carry power, words of both anxiety and comfort. Those words are “how long?”

How long?

“How long?” is one of the catchphrases of the prophets of Israel and Judah. It is like a refrain, a chorus in the unending and often heartbreaking love song between God and his people. “How long, O Lord?”

“*How long, O Lord?*” asks Psalm 13. “Will you forget me forever? *How long* will you hide your face?”

“*How long* will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither?” asks Jeremiah.

“O Lord of hosts, *how long* will you withhold your mercy?” cries Zechariah.

And as we heard today in the first verse of our reading from Habakkuk: “O Lord, *how long* shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?”

How long?

Have you ever felt that way? Maybe you’ve prayed these words before, perhaps not with your lips but probably with your heart. These words, this feeling, this prayer “how long” is like a heavy, sagging weight in your chest that pulls your soul down into your belly. It is the feeling that acknowledges, “This is not good; this is not right; and I feel powerless against it.” Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever looked around and seen something so totally out of your control, wanting to do something about it and knowing that you can’t? That feeling is the bedrock of the prayer, “O Lord, how long?”

For the prophets, it looked like nations in rebellion against God. It looked like a God who had seemingly lost interest in his people. It looked like destruction and despair, like death and destitution, and so they cried, “How long, O Lord?”

For us as individuals, it looks like loved ones growing old, getting sick, battling through weakness, pain, and disease with no solution or clear end in sight. It looks like our young ones rebelling and making horrible decisions that we find ourselves powerless to stop. It looks like anger, certainty, politics, oneupmanship among friends and colleagues, and to all of it, we sigh, “O Lord, how long?”

For us as a people, it looks lately like innocents overseas being decapitated or burned alive by religious fanatics. It also looks like anger, unrest, poverty, and disparity on our own soil. “How long?”

Many of you are aware that this has been a difficult week in the life of our community. Issues of race. Questions of freedom of speech. A whole lot of anger, resentment, fear, and cries for justice... all bubbling right from under the surface of this beautiful town that calls itself “the friendly city.” I even heard someone say this week, “I’ve never carried a gun in my life, but with all the anger going around these days, I wonder if I should.” They weren’t talking about ISIS. They were talking about Tifton.

I have no desire to talk—from this pulpit—about opinions, or facebook posts, or school board verdicts, or the Bill of Rights, or the Constitution, or the right and wrong of people’s desire to say what they feel when they feel it. The only thing I can do—from this pulpit—is to ask the question: “How long?” Because folks, this is not how it’s supposed to be.

But there is a difference. The prophets used to cry, “How long, O Lord? How long ’til you come and make it right?” because they didn’t know the answer. The difference between them and us is that we do. We know the answer to their question. Sure, they had *glimpses* of it. God tells Habakkuk in our reading today, “There is a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.” God tells Zechariah in our another reading today, “I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. I will save my people from the east country and from the west country ... they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and righteousness.” We know now what the prophets could only perceive. We know the answer to the question, “How long?” It came to us in the person of a humble Jew from Nazareth. His name is Jesus.

At times like these, I look around at my neighbors, at people I love, at people who are struggling, and I feel that sagging weight of that question, “How long?” But it’s also at times like these that I remember what it is Jesus has taught us. It is the thing we declare every week in this place, not only with our liturgies but with our lives. It is the thing that is written on the flesh of our hearts. For God’s sake, it is the thing that is written on the billboard we pay for on 20th Street and Highway 41! It is the words, “Love one another.”

Our problem—our “how long” problem, not just in Tifton, but in so much of humanity—is that we do not know one another. When we post unfortunate things on Facebook, it is because we don’t know one another. When we grow angry at others for their opinions (on either side of any issue), it is because we don’t know one another. When people start demonizing one another, pointing fingers, threatening, frightening, smearing, suing, it’s because we do not know one another.

This week, before I knew about any of this, someone told me a great truth. They said, “Fr. Lonnie: there are so many good people out there with a whole lot of God in them. Maybe they just haven’t seen all the light yet.”

Part of what Jesus has taught us is that if we want to see the light of God, we need to find it first in ourselves, but then we have to do the hard work of looking for it in others. We need to *know* one another. We need to *love* one another. This isn’t fairy-tale, pie-in-the-sky sort of stuff. This is real. This is practical. This is us. And this is now. And it’s the only answer I know of to the current question, “How long?”

So, whoever you are, and whoever you don’t know in your community of Tifton, Georgia, it’s time to get to know them. If you are white, then it is time to call up somebody you know who is *not* white and say, “Can we have lunch?” I don’t care what you talk about, as long as it is something real. Talk about your kids. Talk about your uncles. Talk about *whatever* binds you together, but call somebody up, meet up with them somewhere, and *talk*.

If you are a bleeding heart liberal and you happily vote Democratic every season no matter who the candidate is, call up one of your gun toting Republican friends and say, “Can we go to lunch?” I don’t care what you talk about, but call them up and say, “I need to spread some love in my life, and I need to be with people who are different from me.” And if you are a gun toting Republican, call up one of your bleeding heart liberal friends and do the same thing.

Unfortunately, the truth is that our parish is not racially diverse, and that is something we should be deeply concerned with. But one *good* thing I can say is that we are at least *politically* diverse here. As I look out at you, I recognize plenty who are Republicans and plenty who are Democrats. I may not know where each of you stand on every issue, but I do know that in this sanctuary we have large swaths of red and buckets of blue. When we all get together to worship each week, I thank God for a congregation that actually looks downright purple. That, to me, is something of an image of Jesus; it is his Body working and loving together.

We Episcopalians unashamedly believe that heaven is going to be a very large place. When we get there, we believe there are going to be plenty of people we never expected or perhaps even wanted to be there. We’d better get used to it now.

We are the church whose catchphrase is nothing other than the words of Jesus: “Love one another.” I can’t speak for anyone else. I can’t teach anyone else’s congregation. But I can say that “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” What means is that we will get up, we

will step out of our comfort zones, and we will love our neighbors—*ALL* our neighbors, including the ones who may not love us—and we will do it with a love that surpasses all anger, all vengeance, all misunderstanding, and all human understanding.

“How long?” you may ask, like the prophets before you. “How long will you be calling upon us to love others beyond ourselves? How long will you tell us to love others who are different from us? How long will we have to discuss these difficult things and the hard necessity of love? How long?”

How long?

As long as it takes.

Amen.