

“Vision Statement” GPPC 10-30-16
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, Luke 19:1-10

Do you have someone in your life you can be honest with?

Someone who can take your undomesticated honesty and provide unvarnished honesty in return. Do you have someone like that in your life? I hope so.

In my high school years, my friend Jimmy sometimes filled that role. Occasionally after listening to whatever exaggerated concerns were on my mind he would say, “Paschal, you worry too much.”

My mother has also been a great person to be honest with and she is also someone who has no qualms about speaking truth back at me. Recently when I told her that Beth and I are planning to set up an annual family reunion vacation somewhere she said, “You’ve been talking about that for years. You’re never going to do that.”

I think the gauntlet has been thrown down.

My wife Beth is a professional counselor. So I can be pretty honest with her too, but she’s also great at analyzing what might actually be *behind* the words I’m speaking. So there is *that* to deal with.

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In a book she wrote a few years ago, Anne Lamott mentioned her dear friend, Pammy. Lamott says, “I couldn’t stop thinking of something Pammy said right before she died, when she was in a wheelchair, wearing a wig to cover her baldness. We were at Macy’s. I was modeling a short dress for her that I thought my boyfriend would like. But then I asked whether it made me look big in the hips, and Pammy said, as clear and kind as a woman can be, ‘Annie? You really don’t have that kind of time.’ And—slide trombone, bells, rim shot—I *got it*, deep in my being.” (Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 235.)

You really don’t have that kind of time.

Do you have someone in your life you can be honest with about the precious life lent to you by God for a short time?

The Prophet Habakkuk has someone he can be honest with and someone who is honest in return.

Habakkuk says to God, “How long am I going to have to cry for help, and you won’t listen? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you won’t save? Why do you make me see evil and look at trouble? You put destruction and violence in my face; quarreling and contention are on the

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rise. Even the law is helpless and justice never wins. Wicked enemies surround righteous people. And justice is crooked.”

What’s going on? Habakkuk’s society is falling apart from the inside. The people who were called to serve together are instead fighting each other. Injustice is rampant. A society meant to be cohesive as God’s people working together for the common good is instead turning into selfish and destructive competing factions. Imagine such a thing.

Meanwhile, the Babylonian Empire is on the march and it captured and destroyed Jerusalem, Israel’s capitol and Habakkuk’s hometown. As one scholar says, “Babylonia quickly became the superpower of Mesopotamia near the end of the seventh century...The Babylonians were soon able to rule over Assyria, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. And yet less than fifty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, this ancient superpower fell as quickly as it had risen...” (William P. Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi*, 86.)

Internal strife, violence, and injustice. External threat that eventually became a reality is what Habakkuk faces. So he does not sugarcoat his anguished and angry words to God. “Lord, how long am I

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going to keep crying to you for help, and you won't listen? Why are sticking all these horrors right in front of me as if to taunt me? The world around me is falling apart. And when are *you* going to do something about it?"

These are honest emotions and honest words, aren't they? Habakkuk does not tone down what he says to God, and he doesn't pretend that circumstances are not what they are.

Pittsburgh Seminary Professor Donald Gowan said, "Several years ago, after Professor Robert Spike was murdered, our seminary held a memorial service since several faculty members had known him well. It was a typically Christian service, strongly positive in its attitudes toward tragedy and death. But afterwards one faculty member said to me that under the circumstances he felt that there was something wrong with it, for murder had been committed and a valuable life had been wrongfully cut short. He said he strongly felt the need for some of the Old Testament language in which wickedness is cursed." (Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk*, 37-38.)

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Habakkuk says, “You need some cursing about wickedness? I’ll be happy to provide it.”

Habakkuk models how faithful people should live. Like Habakkuk, by faith we see the violence and injustice of the world and we rightfully complain to God about it. And we don’t have to temper our words for God. God does not have to be mollified by us. After all, as the old hymn promises, “This is my Father’s World.”

So when we come to worship, we’re not surprised to hear complaints to God about poverty, hunger, racism, homophobia, gun violence, and other issues of injustice. We’re just following the pattern set for us by Habakkuk, the other Old Testament prophets, and, of course, Jesus. But as we complain we may also hear God say, “Yeah, I hear you. And what are *you* doing about these problems, Church, Body of Christ, hands and feet of Christ? What are *you* doing?”

Habakkuk models honest protest to God about suffering and injustice. And he also models something else.

After letting God have it in chapter one, in chapter two Habakkuk takes another position. He says, “I’m going to stand at my watchpost,

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and station myself on the rampart.” His description sounds like sentry who mans the watchtower of a castle or maybe a walled city, doesn’t it?

And what is he watching for? He’s watching for God’s answer.

Habakkuk says, “I’m going to keep watch to see what God will say to me, how God will answer my complaint.”

He calls God out and then expects an answer. Such audacity.

And here’s the thing; God *does* answer. God says, “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.”

Bible experts are not completely sure what this means or how best to translate it. But maybe a good way for us to read it is to consider our own modern context, a world dizzy with information, swirling with busyness, but confused about purpose. As Richard Lischer pointed out a few years ago, “The average American is subjected to approximately six thousand messages per day. Why should one of them called ‘gospel’ stand out? What is one little message among so many?” (Richard Lischer, *The End of Words*, 13.)

Maybe what Habakkuk means in our context is, “Write the vision, *God’s* vision, plain and clear. Make it stand out. And make it big

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enough, bold enough, that somebody running by can read it and take it in. Make it distinct and grand enough to be read and absorbed into our sometimes hectic lives.”

God says to Habakkuk and us, “The vision is coming, the vision for the right time. It may seem to take a long time to come, but it will surely come. Wait for it.”

Receiving God’s vision, understanding God’s will is not so easy for many of us though. It takes time and prayer. It demands we read Scripture. And quiet reflection, often when we are in worship and also out in nature, is sometimes part of the discernment process too. It all requires a humility that says, “I don’t come first. God comes first.” Maybe that’s why God says, “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.”

If we’re going to receive God’s vision, we have to let go of our pride. We have to be willing to admit we don’t know everything and we make mistakes and we’re willing to be led by God to something new. It calls us to time in quiet solitude as well as in worshipful community.

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Receiving God's vision for our lives requires modesty and trust, also known as faith.

Who are you and what is God's vision for your life? Are you a consumer or are you a child of God? Are you a finicky spiritual customer or are you a disciple of Christ? Are you a spiritual tourist or are you a spiritual pilgrim? Is God calling you to do as you please, or to do as God pleases? Who are you and what is God's vision for your life?

Think about that. Pray about it. Then get a piece of paper, and in just a couple of sentences, write the answer down. In just two sentences, write down who you are and what God is calling you to do with your life. Put the paper somewhere you can see it daily. Make the vision plain and big so you can see it as you run by. Who are you? What is God's purpose for your life? ©Jeff Paschal