

Surely It Will Come

[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, 3:17-19](#)

Dec. 2, 2018 Advent 1

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Advent, we clergy-types like to say, is a time of waiting. To tell the truth, I don't know of anyone who isn't waiting right now, in one way or another. *Waiting* for the doctor's call, the employment decision, the email from a family member, the latest disturbing headline. *Waiting* for some kind of news, mostly, hoping it will be good but knowing that it might not be, because this is *life*, after all. *Waiting* for something to happen to us, for the world to show us what's coming down the pike, so we can respond accordingly.

In both my professional and personal life, I've spent a lot of time waiting. I've sat in hospital waiting rooms, at hospital beds, at deathbeds. I've sat at home, wishing I could make my phone ring or my email refresh through sheer force of will. Or, I've attempted to go about my daily life while some great unknown looms in the background. I've tried to live with uncertainty, in the *meantime* between one reality and another, and maybe it's no coincidence we call it that: it can feel like a *mean* time, a harsh time, that threshold state when things are up in the air and we don't know exactly how they will land.

The season of Advent is designed to reflect this kind of anticipatory waiting. To honor it, even, to name it as sacred, to say, the whole world waits like this. The whole world waits, tensed up, uncertain, hoping against hope for—what?

God.

The whole world waits for God to show up.

Because God knows... we need God.

We need God to save us.

We need God to deliver us.

We need God to heal us.

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,

and you will not listen?
Or cry to you 'Violence!
and you will not save?"

Our text today was written over 2500 years ago, but I feel like those words could be spoken today. I felt those words, that plea in my bones earlier this week, when I saw the now-iconic photo of a young woman pulling her children from a tear-gas canister at our southern border at Tijuana. The mother is wearing a t-shirt with Anna and Elsa from Frozen on the front. Her children are in diapers. One of them is barefoot, the other wearing only flip flops.

Powerful voices would have us believe that these three are an assault, an onslaught, a threat to our country, our way of life, our security, our economic stability, et cetera, et cetera.

The woman in the picture is named Maria Meza, and she is 39 years old, and a single mother of five children. Like many of the migrants in the so-called "caravan" making its way through Central America to the border, she originates from Honduras. Honduras is a country stricken by extreme poverty and violence, conditions created by the exploitative trade and military policies of the United States, policies that date back to the 19th century ([source](#)). Honduras is the way it is because of America's involvement, across decades and administrations.

Maria was interviewed after the picture was taken. She said that she and her children weren't attempting to cross the border when they were tear-gassed. They were simply looking. She said,

"I brought five of my kids with me yesterday. I was there with them at the wall. I felt sad, scared, and wanted to cry. That's when I grabbed my daughters and ran. I thought my kids were going to die with me because of the gas we inhaled. We started running, and we fell in the mud, but when I wanted to rise and get up, I couldn't. Another guy grabbed me by the hand and helped me get up. They know we are human beings just like them. It wasn't right that they acted that way with kids. They have kids too, and they should've thought about their own kids, just like they should've thought about ours. It wasn't right what they did, to throw [tear gas] bombs. I'm praying to God. I know that he will open the doors so that we can enter, or if we stay in Tijuana, he'll open the doors so they will be able to give us, maybe, some sort of papers so that we can

stay and work here. Like I told you, I'm a mother who needs a job. I work to help my kids move forward and give them the best" ([source](#)).

Maria's thoughts and feelings are so universal; yet by an accident of birth, she has nothing, while others, comparatively, have everything.

Listen again to Habakkuk:

"Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack

and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—

therefore judgement comes forth perverted."

There is a timelessness to these words.

Habakkuk was one of the minor prophets of the Hebrew Bible. We don't know much biographical information about Habakkuk at all, but we know a lot about his faith. This prophet, this person, is dealing with one of the most basic challenges of being in relationship with God, that difficult truth that everyone who wants to trust in a loving, faithful God must face:

What do we do with the reality of injustice and suffering?

What do we do with the fact that human greed prevails, more often than not?

What do we do when our doubt—our doubt in God, our doubt in human goodness, our doubt in ourselves—looms larger than our faith?

Habakkuk has an answer.

We wait.

Here's the thing. I think, very often, waiting feels like a passive act. A powerless state of being. It is often the case, when one is waiting, that one is captive the whims of greater forces. I lived in Boston for many years, and took the T, the subway, everywhere. It notoriously ran late, and I spent so much of time on subway platforms, straining to hear a train coming down the tracks, or

in a stopped subway car, trapped in the bowels of the city, wondering if we'd ever start moving again.

But waiting, for Habakkuk, is not the same as being confined, or submissive, or compliant. No, waiting, for this prophet, is active. It's a job, a duty:

"I will stand at my watch-post,
and station myself on the rampart."

The lookout is an incredibly important person; they alert everyone else when conditions change. And they can't just sit there, twiddling their thumbs, yawning, stretching. They've got to be awake, alert, scanning the horizon, ready for anything, bad news, good news, whatever.

In the case of Habakkuk, he's waiting for a response from God to his complaints. And God does respond, sort of, by simply turning everything back around to Habakkuk. You have ideas about what's wrong with the world? You have an idea of what the world *should* look like? OK then, prophet, "Write the vision," God says.

Make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

For there is still 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, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,

but the righteous live by their faith.

This last verse has been deeply influential to Christian thought. Paul quotes it in several of his letters to early churches. For early followers of Jesus, who were living counter-culturally, persecuted by the Roman Empire, there was real comfort to be found here. There was a promise: the promise that no matter what the present reality looks like, God is at work, creating a different reality where wrongs are righted, where sins are forgiven, where the hungry are fed, where tears are wiped away.

So, even though the present moment is pretty awful—no blossoms on the fig tree, no fruit on the vine, the fields and flocks dying—the promise is enough to buoy Habakkuk to great heights, as if with the feet of a deer, as illustrated so beautifully by our bulletin cover art today.

Along with this promise comes an acknowledgement that God's timeline is not always our timeline: "If it seems to tarry, wait for it."

There is also the sense that as much as we need God to help bring about the salvation of the world, God needs us, too. God needs us as co-conspirators. As co-creators. As visionaries and prophets. As recorders. As witnesses. As runners. As lookouts. We all have roles to play while we wait, to help usher in that new world bit by bit until it overwhelms all the pain and inequality and death that has preceded it.

This *active* posture of waiting and watching against all odds—I think it's the only way to be faithful. That's why we pray every week that God's will be done and God's kingdom come: because we yearn for that day when everything is set right, knowing that we won't see its total fulfillment in our lifetimes but that glimpses are possible, especially if we are paying attention and doing our part.

And that brings us back to this season of Advent. According to Christian tradition, the Messiah, the Savior, comes in the person of Jesus. This season, let's pay attention to his birth story, closer than ever, because it is speaking to us, more loudly than ever. It is the timeless story of a family who had nothing, who were buffeted by forces larger than themselves, who fled violence searching only for a safe place.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, is coming; and, according to the mystery of our faith, he's always been here. He's down at the border, incognito, sharing a table with the hungry and the thirsty. Let's stretch ourselves, stretch our hearts, stretch our minds, stretch our expectations of what's possible. Let's make room for our Emmanuel and his family in any way we are able, with the hope that God can, somehow, in some way, and only with our cooperation, save the world.

Surely it will come.

Amen.