

Austin College Perspectives and Reflections Service  
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## *Write the Vision*

This summer, I've found myself thinking a lot about a document that was written about 2700 years ago.

When the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk looked around at the society where he lived, he had a lot to say about things that made him frustrated, outraged, or disappointed. And as I've looked around this summer at the society where I live—where we live—I've been feeling his vibe.

The Book of Habakkuk starts like this:

***O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?***

Did you know that since the Austin College Commencement service on May 15 there have been 533 recorded terrorist incidents throughout the world? In Baghdad, Kabul, Istanbul, Nice, Orlando, and hundreds of other places

That's an average of almost 6 per day all Summer.

I don't think most of us would have any trouble imagining Habakkuk's state of mind.

Habakkuk's grumpy prayer goes on:

***Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?***

Roger Ailes was accused of sexual harassment and left his position at Fox News with a reported \$40 million payout and no public resolution of the charges against him.

Since Commencement, at least 4 unarmed black men have been shot by police in this country:

- Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge
- Philando Castile in Minneapolis

- Charles Kinsey in North Miami
- Paul O'Neal in Chicago

And, last Sunday night, Kouren-Rodney Thomas was shot and killed by a “Neighborhood Watchman” in Raleigh, North Carolina

***Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me;***

Five Dallas police officers were killed on July 7 and 7 others were wounded.

Three police officers were shot and killed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on July 17.

***Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.***

I'll just mention the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and leave it at that.

We've got our share of strife and contention.

***So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.  
The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment  
comes forth perverted.***

All 6 Baltimore Police officers who were charged with assault, manslaughter, or murder in the April 12, 2015 death of Freddie Gray have been acquitted or had the charges against them dropped.

As I said, I've been feeling Habakkuk's vibe all Summer.

Aren't y'all glad I chose such a jolly and cheerful reading for this service this morning?

Habakkuk is definitely pretty grumpy as his book begins. He argues back and forth with God for another 14 verses in Chapter 1.

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When we get to Chapter 2, a couple of really interesting things happen.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Habakkuk says:

***I will take my stand to watch,  
and station myself on the tower,  
and look forth to see what he will say to me,  
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.***

After doing all that whining and complaining, and giving voice to what was probably legitimate outrage and frustration Habakkuk essentially says,

“Okay God, it’s on!”

“What have you got to say for yourself?”

“I’m ready to have this out.”

I love that brashness.

One of the interesting things about this story is that, in the midst of all his outrage and frustration, Habakkuk assumes that he’s absolutely capable of complaining to—and even arguing with—God.

It is a significant feature of this story that, in chapter 2 verse 1, this individual from 2700 years ago who faces the same sorts of disappointments and social strife that we all face is presumptuous enough to ask for, and expect, an answer from God regarding this unacceptable situation.

Particularly in the context of other ancient near-Eastern religions, that’s a huge and unusual vision of the value and prerogatives of an individual human character.

We don’t know anything else about Habakkuk. The story makes no claims that he’s special in any way. As far as we know, he’s not royal, he’s not secretly divine, he’s not magic. He’s just a grumpy, frustrated guy who has a bone to pick with God.

And then we get to verse 2:

***And the LORD answered me:  
"Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets,***

***so he may run who reads it.  
For still the vision awaits its time;  
it hastens to the end--it will not lie.  
If it seem slow, wait for it;  
it will surely come,  
it will not delay.***

It's huge that God answers Habakkuk.

One of my favorite features of the Hebrew scriptures—what we Christians call the Old Testament—is all of the accounts of one-on-one, give-and-take conversations between God and individual humans.

Adam does it in Genesis 2 and 3.

Moses does it in Exodus 3.

It happens all over the Book of Job

Jeremiah argues with God after God calls him to be a prophet.

Jonah does a stupid thing and gets himself into trouble. God saves him with a fish. Then Jonah does another stupid thing and God tells him to get over himself.

And then we've got Habakkuk's little self-pity party.

Different ones of us probably have different theological opinions about those stories, but they make great literature.

They're great ways to enter conversations about how things should be and why they're not that way.

I like really like it that God answers whiny, grumpy Habakkuk.

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The first time I looked at this passage I didn't necessarily like the answer that God gives to Habakkuk.

“Wait for it?”

Is that really God’s best answer to Habakkuk? Or to us?

“Yeah, things might be lousy now, but they’ll get better someday.”

“Just wait.”

Reading that makes me feel like a Bernie Sanders supporter.

“Yeah, the Revolution is coming, not just not now.”

“Wait for things to get better” just doesn’t seem like an adequate response to the violence, trouble, strife, and contention that infect our lives and our world every day.

But that’s not all that God has to say. Before telling Habakkuk that the vision awaits its time and to wait for it if it seems slow, God tells him to “write the vision.”

And that’s the part of this story that I think is relevant for us as we sit together in this big ol’ Chapel and kick off another year together at this little college out here on the Texas prairie.

Like Habakkuk, we all woke up today in a world full of

- Violence
- Wrongdoing
- Trouble
- Destruction
- Strife
- Contention and
- Injustice

But we work for Austin College.

We work for a place that tells the world, and promises our students and their families, that we value Personal Growth, Community, Justice, Service, Intellectual & Personal Integrity, Academic Excellence, and Participation in Community Life.

Those are the seven values listed in our Mission Statement.

They could just be empty, pretty words.

Or they could be the vision that we write together in the face of violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, and injustice.

That's the vision that drives us as we strive together to create and maintain a community where we notice each other in all our magnificent diversity, cherish each other, hear each other, serve each other, and inspire each other.

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Every time I think about our colleague Lisa Brown I think about outrage.

She has a poster on the wall in her office that says:

*If you're not outraged,  
You're not paying attention.*

I get that.

Habakkuk would get that.

There are—and will continue to be—outrageous things in our nation and in our world that must be named and contended against.

Violence, Wrongdoing, Trouble, Destruction, Strife, Contention, and Injustice are part of the world where we woke up this morning.

There's a lot to be outraged about.

But if we thought that was *all* there was in the world, none of us would be here.

We all believe there's more than that.

Let's spend this year working together to write a different vision of life together right here and right now.

In exactly this place,  
at precisely this time.  
let's show the world that it can be done.

It won't always be easy.  
But it's who we are.  
And it's what we do.  
Let's get busy.