***Peace That Guards Our Hearts***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 15, 2024*

*based on Habakkuk 1:2-4 & Philippians 4:4-7*

A lot of us have been suffering from what I will call, for lack of a better name, Post-Election Trauma (P.E.T.). Here are the common symptoms I’m hearing about: irritability, trouble sleeping, weight gain, increased alcohol consumption, feelings of powerlessness and resentment, avoidance of the news, conflict at home, less productivity at work, depression, and something called “cognitive dissonance” which is the crunching sound your brain makes when it comes across new information that contradicts what you thought you knew about the world and your fellow human beings. You find your values aren’t as main-stream as you thought they were.

Habakkuk is the perfect prophet to address Post-Election Trauma. I want to quote this prophet because last week and also this morning we’re looking into the final letter the apostle Paul wrote, and when Paul talks about faith and being faithful he quotes Habakkuk continually.

Habakkuk is clearly his favorite Hebrew writer. So I want to use these words from the prophet as a foundation for a few comments I will make later about Paul’s letter to the Philippians. So, hear these words from Habakkuk (1:2-4).

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
    and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
    and you will not save?
**3**Why do you make me see wrongdoing
    and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
    strife and contention arise.
**4**So the law becomes slack,
    and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous;
    therefore judgment comes forth perverted. (Hab. 1:2-4)

The enemies on the horizon are the Chaldeans (another name for Babylonians). They are “a fierce and impetuous nation” whose horses are “swifter than leopards, more menacing than wolves at dusk.”

They seize dwellings not their own. They gather captives like sand. Apocalypse is around the next corner. Interestingly, Habakkuk’s argument is not with them. His argument is with God. Why is God letting the liars and cheats win? What has happened to the God of justice?

Habakkuk thought he knew who God was, but the injustice he sees is messing with his head. The Divine Listener will not listen. The Divine Savior refuses to intervene and save.

Some tell Habakkuk that maybe he’s wrong. Maybe God favors the other side; the winners in this contest Well, instead of giving up his values, Habakkuk chooses to swim against the prevailing current. He decides to remain faithful to truth and justice as he knows it, even if God isn’t faithful to those things. Did you hear that? Even if it appears that God has given up on the good.

So, what does he do? Habakkuk stations himself on the rampart of his fortress and waits for God to answer his complaint, which amounts to two words:

*“How long?”*

How long must this nonsense go on. It’s like a bad dream except, few if any, seem to be waking up.

When God finally answers, the news is not good.

God says that the Chaldeans victory is serving a purpose, however temporary. Their arrogance will circle back and crush them, but that is not Habakkuk’s business. His business, says God, is to write a vision for the masses to read. He is to write this message from the Almighty using such large letters that even Usain Bolt, sprinting by in his Olympic heyday, could even read it. Here it is:

“For there is still a vision for the appointed time. It speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems slow, well, this is a slow process. Wait for it anyway. Count on it.”

It’s like the tortoise on the first lap of a long race. He’s on his way. He won’t tire. You’ll just have to hang in there ‘til the end of the race.

Okay, yeah, but what about now? What does one do in the meantime? Well, God throws a bone to Habakkuk. God agrees that the spirit of those who have little interest in truth and justice is seriously sick. They should know better. “But,” says God, get over it. Don’t focus on that. Your scorn will eat you for breakfast. “No, says God, “The righteous will live by their faith.”

To live by your faith means what, then? It means remaining faithful to truth and fair-play and supporting the weak even when your opponents laugh at you for doing it.

So what’s the bottom line here? Habakkuk reminds us that it’s okay to be angry with God. He says, the faithful are still faithful when, looking at the victory of the liars, they question God and God’s faithfulness.

I mean, look, there are Biblical precedents for this. Job complained to God. Jeremiah did, too. Jesus expressed doubt and anger from the cross. Habakkuk is in good company.

Scholar activist, Ta-Nehisi Coates is like a contemporary Habakkuk. Recently he wrote, “History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.” I will repeat that …

“History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.”

Does that sound at all familiar? I quoted something very like that in a sermon I preached on the first Sunday of November, two days before the election. I quoted the late Russian dissident, Alexei Navalny, who said, “Everything will be alright, and even if it won’t be, we will have the consolation of having lived honest lives.”

I don’t know if you have thought of this, but Alexei Navalny would be very happy right now because the murdering despot, Vladimir Putin who had Navalny killed in his prison cell suffered quite a set-back this week.

His favorite puppet (outside of Donald Trump) is Bashir al Assad, and Putin’s defense of Syria fell apart like paper mache last week. His soldiers high-tailed it and ran away; every one of them.

It has taken 14 years, but the despot has fallen. Justice was delayed, but the dictator was eventually routed.

Journalist Anne Applebaum, a scholar of dictatorships, wrote about the meaning of Assad’s fall in *The Atlantic Monthly*. She said, “cold, deliberate, well-planned cruelty” like Assad’s “is meant to inspire hopelessness. Ludicrous lies and cynical propaganda campaigns are meant to create apathy and nihilism. Random arrests create destabilizing waves of refugees that leave those who remain, in despair. Authoritarian regimes seek to rob people of any ability to plan for a different future, to convince people that their dictatorships are eternal.”

Add to that this from journalist, Kareem Saheen:

*How do you distill the meaning of what happened in the last 10 days, as Syria’s rebels staged the greatest insurgent comeback in history to end 60 years of Baathist rule? How do you distill the liberation of Aleppo, one of the world’s oldest cities? How do you describe the freeing of Hama, a city that has been so thoroughly traumatized by al-Assad’s [father’s] rampage in the 1980s that it has waited 40 years to grieve its men, women and children? How do you capture the emotional resonance of watching church bells ring in the Christian town of Sahnaya to the tune of “One, one, one, the Syrian people are one?”*

*The sheer joy and suffering on the faces and in the eyes of the thousands of detainees freed from Assad’s dungeons after 10, 15, 20, 40 years without a breath of fresh air … [Now] conversations alternate between disbelief, euphoria and free-flowing tears. “He’s gone! He’s gone! He’s gone!” …*

Assad’s supporters used to chant the following: “Our leader forever, Bashar al-Assad.”

But now, “forever is over,” Syrians chanted over and over.

Imagine – the end of “forever.”

And there was this special moment repeated many times, I’m sure. A father in Aleppo stands in his doorway as the rebels roll in. One of them hops off a truck. It takes a few seconds (good news is hard to process when you have expected the opposite forever). In time he realizes it is his son, exiled for a decade and now returning as a liberator. The young rebel’s military swagger dissolves there in the doorway as he kneels to kiss his fathers’ feet, weeping as if he will never stop.

That’s my segue to Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Last week we looked at the first chapter of this, the final letter we have from the apostle. He’s in prison somewhere. His friends in Philippi are worried sick for him. They send a young man from their community to support him. They load the young fellow down with gifts for Paul. We even know the name of the young man -- Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus got sick on the way, travel being so harrowing in the ancient world. But he recovers, arrives in the city where Paul is incarcerated; probably Ephesus. He locates the make-shift prison.

When Epaphroditus sticks his head into Paul’s cell, Paul looks up. The face is familiar but this is not one of the jailers he’s used to seeing. “Oh, my God,” he’s thinking: It’s that young fellow who sat at my feet in Philippi. It’s like he’s looking into the eyes of the son he never had. God has not forgotten him, after all.

I imagine we’ve all had something akin to that experience – at least I hope so -- maybe in a hospital bed, or late at night when your car broke down … you know what it feels like to see that face.

I bet that at the end of the long, harrowing trip, that boy needed as much (or more) love than the apostle Paul did.

And maybe giving Epaphroditus love and welcome was more a tonic for Paul than it was for the boy. Maybe it connected Paul again with who he essentially was, a father figure, a care giver. Maybe Epaphroditus reminded Paul of himself 20 years earlier.

Here’s a story that touches me. It’s by Sigrid McLaughlin of Santa Cruz, California. It’s the same story – just updated.

*Close to midnight my doorbell rings. Who would be coming by so late? Has there been an emergency? I open the door. A tall young man I’ve never seen before stands in front of me, wearing jeans and a white sweater. In the light of the street lamp, I make out a head full of dark curls and warm brown eyes. In his fidgeting hands is a plastic shopping bag.*

*“Is this your car?” he asks, pointing to my Honda Civic.*

*“Yes. Is something wrong?”*

*“No, but I saw the sign of the fish on the back. Are you a Christian?”*

*I bought the car used, I explain; the sign was already on it. “But I’m a spiritual person,” I add.*

*After a moment’s hesitation, he asks, “Would you pray for me? I am going through hard times right now.”*

*My heart goes out to him. Haven’t I been in tough situations before? “Yes, I will,” I say, as if this were an ordinary request.*

*“Would you also give me a hug?”*

*“Sure,” I respond, again as if this was nothing unusual. I extend my arms, and we hold each other in a firm embrace. His breathing is irregular. I hug him for what seems a long time. Then I say, to my own surprise: “There is light at the other end of the tunnel. You’ll be fine.”*

*Such a platitude, I think. But that’s what arose from somewhere inside of me. I touch his hair and stroke his back, as a mother might. Then we release each other.*

*“My name is Don,” he says. “What’s yours?”*

*“Sigrid.”*

*“Thank you, Sigrid. Good night,” he says.*

*“Good night. Be well.”*

*He walks away, down the street.*

*I return to my living room, determined to pray for him as I promised, even though it is late. My eyes closed, I visualize his face and concentrate on wishing him well. What trust he had, daring to knock on a stranger’s door at midnight, assuming it would be a Christian, and a kind one, who answered. What faith, that a stranger’s prayer could make a difference. Could I have done such a thing? No, never!*

*Wait. That’s not true. Late one icy night in an Alpine mountain village, my son and I had a terrible argument, and he locked me out. All the hotels were full, and my car wasn’t running. I knocked on doors until, around midnight, a woman took me in, gave me a bed, and shared her grief about her daughter’s death.*

*An expansive sensation wells up in me, and I see that this young man gave me something in return for my prayer and hug: the gifts of his vulnerability and openness, and a model of courage and faith. (Sun magazine, September 2006).*

One part of that I like especially, now that we are close to Christmas is the line …*.* “All the hotels were full, and my car wasn’t running. I knocked on doors until, around midnight, a woman took me in.”

This letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi would be his last public word to anybody, as far as we know. He would shortly be executed. The text from that letter that is our focus today suggests to us his knowledge of that fact. And yet he writes the following wonderful admonitions that call us to a living and radiant hope, It’s like God telling Habakkuk, don’t focus on evil winning the latest round. Paul says to this caring little church in Philippi that just bought new chairs (I added that last part) …

"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence; if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

So, let us take to heart, as the apostle urges, all that is true in this time full of lies, all that is honorable in a time full of dishonor; all that is just and pure; all that is excellent and worthy of praise.

In the face of everything in this life that daily threatens to break our hearts, how comforting it is to imagine that, in the long run, truth and love might, in fact, have the last word. Amen