

[Habakkuk 1:1-7; 2:1-4; 3:3b-6, 17-19](#)

Habakkuk is a good reminder that we don't start Advent in a spirit of rejoicing. We start Advent in a spirit of bewilderment and light dread, and move on toward greater hope as it progresses. It's legitimately hard for us as contemporary Christians to do this, because in real life we're actually getting ready for celebrations. Unless you're depressed, which is also legitimate, you're kind of excited for Christmas and seeing special people and buying fun gifts and decorating the house. There is little suspense in the prescribed Advent waiting, because we all know what we're waiting for and when it will happen. Thus the age-old tension between Mairi wearing her penguin sweater and me wearing my apocalypse vest. It's hard to hold both things together.

But Habakkuk sets just the right note of impending disaster. It's written probably sometime between the first Babylonian invasion of Judah in 597 BCE and the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE. The prophet is crying out to God to know why God demands faithfulness from the people, when God won't do anything about the rampant injustice and corruption in Judean society. The law is slack and justice never prevails. Ordinary people, caught up in the maws of insurance denials or wage theft, are bleeding out, while the wealthy and well-known commit offenses brazenly in broad daylight and there is nary a murmur.

God's response to Habakkuk is chilling: Watch me. You think I'm not doing anything? "I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own." This is not good news. If God is planning to rescue Judah from its own internal problems, the implication is that things are going to get worse before they get better. God's plan seems to be to empower the Babylonian empire to

invade and seize the Judeans' dwellings. "Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves." E.g., they make their own rules, so if you think you're seeing criminal impunity now, just wait till the Babylonians come back.

Habakkuk decides that he's going to stand at the watchpost and wait to see what God will say to him regarding his complaint. What God just said about the Babylonians surely is not God's last word. And indeed, God does have a job for the prophet: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For 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."

Habakkuk is to write a vision in such a way that someone running can take it all in easily—like a billboard, maybe, or a bumper sticker. It needs to be simple, short, to the point, and large. But God doesn't tell him what the vision is. Is he supposed to just write, "There is a vision we're waiting for"? Well, maybe.

Maimonides, the pre-eminent 12th century Torah scholar, wrote "Thirteen Principles of Faith" in his introduction to the tenth chapter of Talmud Sanhedrin. Although they have never been universally accepted, because that's not how Judaism works, they have been tremendously influential. Principle #12 is "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, and though he may tarry, still I await him every day." "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, and though he may tarry (delay), still I await him every day."

Azriel David Fastag was a Polish Jew known for his beautiful voice, a composer of Hasidic tunes before World War Two. In 1942 he was put on a train to Treblinka, along with hundreds of other Jews.

While on the train he composed a melody for the words of the twelfth principle, “Ani Ma’amin” “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, nevertheless, I wait each day for him to arrive.”

Azriel David began singing the song, at first quietly, and eventually with his full voice. Soon everyone on the train was singing the moving, haunting melody together with him, as they were transformed from human wreckage into beacons of hope and faith. After some time had passed, and they had sung the melody many times, Azriel David asked for silence and announced that he would give half of his heavenly reward to anyone who would deliver this new melody to his revered mentor, the Modzitzer Rebbe, in New York.

Although the train was locked from the outside, two young boys still managed to escape off the train, through a gap in the roof of one of the carriages. One was killed falling from the train, but the other one ultimately made it to New York, where he delivered the melody to the Modzitzer Rebbe. The rebbe was deeply moved by the melody and the story of its composition, and told his followers: “With this tune they went to the gas chambers; with this tune we will march to greet Moshiach.”ⁱ

This story is an instance of the 12th Principle. And I think it’s also descriptive of Habakkuk’s situation. “Write a vision,” God tells him, so that even someone running can take it in; and Habakkuk writes, “There is a vision beyond what is, now.” “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, and though he may tarry, still I await him every day.” Habakkuk can’t even describe the vision, but he announces that it is.

The last bit of the reading sounds pre-apocalyptic. God’s glory covers the heavens and the earth is full of God’s praise, but pestilence and plagues and earthquakes accompany God’s arrival. Mountains are shattered and valleys sink low. Just in terms of what’s happening, the situation now is worse than it was in Habakkuk’s first complaint. He started with corruption and injustice, but now we have natural disasters, immediate and lethal threats. And yet his tone has changed. Now he says, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.”

With grand disregard for the prevailing theology that prosperity is a sign of God's favor and calamity is a sign of God's anger, the prophet now rejoices in the Lord despite the barrenness of the crops and livestock. What has changed since the beginning of the book, when he was feeling abandoned by God? Nothing except that he has cast the vision. We didn't skip any big reveal in the text, trust me. All that happened was that he was told to "write the vision" and then there was a lot more complaining about the one percent. And we know that the Babylonian Exile was just over the horizon, as God had warned. Habakkuk winds up, "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." Knowing that there is a vision, even if he himself can't see it yet, gives Habakkuk reason for radical rejoicing.

Edward Hays tells a story about a young man who goes to visit a wise hermit and asks him, "Why is it, Abba, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?" The hermit answers that one day he and his dog were sitting out in the sun when a white rabbit hopped by, and his dog jumped up to chase it. As the dog chased, other dogs joined the chase, but eventually they all dropped off and went back to whatever they'd been doing. Only his dog continued the chase.

The young man is confused and says, "What does that have to do with my question?" and the hermit says, "My dog was the only one who saw the white rabbit. The other dogs just saw the chase and heard him barking. Once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase."

Habakkuk saw the rabbit; that's why his lamentations turned to rejoicing *despite* the

grim circumstances. I just read an article about racial reparations in the *Washington Post*, a topic that confounds any public consensus despite historical precedents and the obvious inequities that persist. The article refers to a book, *Reconsidering Reparations*, published a few months ago by a young scholar at Georgetown University, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, who speaks of reparations not as payback or getting even or settling scores but as what he calls a “construction project.”ⁱⁱ I won’t go into the content of his vision, but it took account of a lot of the obstacles that exist, the challenges we have to address anyway, and matched up with a cross-racial vision that Dr. King had cast: “It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor.”

Part of me, when I hear “reparations,” thinks OMG, we don’t have time for utopianism now, we’re in an emergency. My inner self rolls its eyes, the way I used to when people would talk about same-sex marriage. Like, that would be nice, but back here on Planet Earth we have urgent work to do. But, we did get same-sex marriage. And, this prophet, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, has cast a vision. And maybe it’s worth it to rejoice even when the fields yield no food and the flock is cut off from the fold. We don’t even need to know exactly what the vision is, just that it’s coming. We don’t need to deny or ignore the current catastrophic state of affairs. It’s real. AND “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the messiah, and though he may tarry, still I await him every day.”

Faithful God, you proved your faithfulness to your people when they cried out to you in distress. Be present in our distress, and show us how to be faithful to you in the midst of suffering. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

ⁱ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/how-ani-maamin-survived-the-shoah/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/11/21/reparations-black-americans-reimagined/>