

August 11, 2019

TEXT: [Habakkuk 1:1–5; 2:2–4; 3:17–19](#)

TITLE: What's Going On

By The Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

In May 1971, Marvin Gaye released his eleventh studio album and single titled, “What’s Going On.” That song became the unofficial anthem that summer for many in the black community. Although the Civil Rights Act had passed seven years beforehand, blacks in this country were still being treated unequally, experienced discrimination and systemic racism. So that summer, on behalf of the black community Gaye lamented:

Mother, mother there's too many of you crying. Brother, brother, brother. There's far too many of you dying. You know we've got to find a way. To bring some lovin' here today.

Father, father, we don't need to escalate. You see, war is not the answer. For only love can conquer hate you know we've got to find a way. To bring some lovin' here today, oh oh oh.

Picket lines and picket signs. Don't punish me with brutality. Talk to me, so you can see.

Oh, what's going on. What's going on? Yeah, what's going on. Ah, what's going on.

Gaye’s lament is just as relevant today as it was the summer of 1971. We can’t escape the constant notifications on our devices or turn the television on without breaking news reports that innocent people have been gunned down in the most innocuous places: churches, temples, mosques, and synagogues worshipping God; shopping in Walmart; out on a Saturday night celebrating the end of work week; in the work place, on play grounds, or simply walking the streets of any city. People of Latin descent taken into custody and threatened with deportation at their workplaces or while dropping their children off at school; horrific news of the exploitation of innocent children by people they sometimes know and trust; people of color killed by those who have pledged to protect and serve; and a president and government leaders who refuse to do what is just, and right to ensure that dangerous military style guns are not accessible to anyone, for any reason. What’s going on?

The prophet Habakkuk, a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Zephaniah, probably served during “two of the most significant events in the history of the ancient Near East – the fall of Nineveh to a coalition of Medes and Babylonians and the establishment of Babylon as the greatest power in the region.”¹ God’s people were in captivity, living under harsh conditions and being treated unjustly. Scripture tells us that an oracle or burden came to Habakkuk and he entered into a conversation with God where he

¹ (Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, New International Version, The American Commentary, Vol. 20, B&H Publishing Group, 1998, 246).

lamented: “Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save.” Habakkuk was crying out to God on behalf of the entire community and wondering where is God and why is God tolerating injustice, suffering, destruction, violence, strife and conflict? What’s going on?

Some believe that faithful people don’t question or ask God to clarify or explain that which we don’t understand. And yet the Bible is replete with prophets, people and Psalms that question and lament. Psalm 13 reads: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord.” my God!

Habakkuk’s lament came at a time when Judah’s hope for justice and righteousness had been raised during King Josiah’s reign, when he rediscovered the Book of Deuteronomy and he returned the country to righteous living. Only to be shattered when Josiah was killed and his son, Jehoiakim ruled and once again corrupted the government. Habakkuk lamented that injustice and suffering, destruction and violence, strife and conflict were rampantly destroying the community and the people. And as a result the legal system was paralyzed, and justice was perverted. Why would God tolerate and allow this destructive, divisive, sinful behavior to continue?

We are also living in a time when there was great hope and some thought we were living in a post-racial society of full inclusion and acceptance. But nothing could be further from the truth. Vitriolic tweets and shouts of “go back to where you came from;” a justice system that is “just for some of us,” and if you have money, influence or power you can buy your way out of a conviction or at most get a slap on the hand; unequal pay for persons of color and women; urban schools that don’t have the resources to properly educate students; people living on the streets because they are either mentally ill and unable to receive medical treatment, or don’t have resources to secure adequate housing; and the marginalization of people who are non-binary. What’s going on?

Questions and lament are elements of faithful believers’ responsibility, burden, and honest dialogue with God, and are inspired, just as Habakkuk’s questioning was inspired by the Spirit of God. If we are fearful to approach God openly, honestly and without hesitation, perhaps our relationship with God isn’t as genuine and authentic as we profess. “Habakkuk’s protest is faithful and inspired, because he does so out of his conviction that God is good all the time, and his questions, *and our questions*, are personal conversations with a loving Creator and Redeemer, who accompanies us in suffering, and who will, in time manifest healing, victory and restoration.”²

God answered Habakkuk and instructed him: write this down. I don’t want anyone to misunderstand what I’m about to say: “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” (Hab. 2:2–3). God moves in time, not on time. Even when we think that God

² Ibid, 250.

is not present, does not see, understand or is uninterested in the havoc and recklessness, the injustices and unrighteousness, the lawlessness and instability of our lives, communities and situations—the writer of Proverbs reminds us that “to everything there is a season” (Eccl. 3:1). The Apostle Paul confirmed and stated that “All things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to God’s purpose” (Rom. 8:28). The Psalmist wrote: “Wait on the Lord: be of good courage and God shall strengthen your heart; wait I say on the Lord” (Ps. 27:14); and the prophet Isaiah (40:28–30) wrote: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; the Lord’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Waiting on God does not connote standing still, being helpless, failing to seek or work for resolution to the problems that plague us today. The righteous live by faith. Not a faith of our own making, but the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, our savior and redeemer who came and walked among us; who lamented in the Garden, “Father if it be your will, let this cup pass from me. Not my will, but your will be done” (Luke 22:42); and, who cried in agony on the cross, “Abba, Abba, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Jesus’ relationship with his Father was such that he dared to approach God with raw, honest anguish and pain, trusting that God would hear him and move on his behalf.

God is with us, in our anguish and despair, and accompanies and empowers us through the power of the Spirit who compels us to faithfully shine light into places of darkness and injustice; faithfully protest discrimination, and xenophobia as we work to dismantle systemic racism, and nationalism run amok; faithfully accompany people who are demonized and targeted for deportation, marginalized, dehumanized, and demoralized; and faithfully serve our God who compels us to respond with love and kindness, justice and inclusion, mercy and grace.

Habakkuk’s conversation with God began with the question “what’s going on” and concluded with reassurance that God is in the mix of life with us, and can be trusted despite the fact that there are some things we will not understand and will endure. In the passage Annabel read, Paul wrote to Timothy, “God did not give us the spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind. So, we will join in the suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim. 1:7). Habakkuk wrote: “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, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.” When we are moved to ask, “What’s going on? Cry out to God, lament and remain faithful, and trust that God knows, God cares and God will move. Write in on your heart and work while you wait.

Amen.