

A Vision for Our Times

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Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

1:1 The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

1:2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

1:3 Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

1:4 So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous-- therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

2:1 I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

2:2 Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

2:3 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.

2:4 Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

I.

It was my pleasure this weekend to go on a brief pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to a place I have had only the dimmest knowledge of, for many years. When Lynn and I were first married, in 1986, the town where I was living and working wasn't too far from the birthplace of W.E.B DuBois, co-founder of the NAACP, one of the originators of the modern field of sociology, the first black man to earn a PhD from Harvard University, and surely one of the most profound and prophetic commentators on racism in US history.

And yet in those years of the 80's, I never did get around to finding a place to visit where DuBois was officially commemorated. Perhaps that was because it hadn't been set up completely. This weekend, in the town of Great Barrington I finally did locate the memorial to DuBois. Lynn and I went to the site of the great man's boyhood home. All that remains physically of the ancestral house is the remnant of a fireplace and some scattered foundation stones. But a memorial has been organized on the land. We walked a broad path into the wooded lot, and read signs posted, there in the woods—signs with stories and quotes from Dr. DuBois. The briefest of these quotations, taken from his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, was short and yet clear: it named the beginning of a struggle which would persist for a hundred years. Wrote DuBois in 1903: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."

There in the woods on the outskirts of Great Barrington, adjacent to a cornfield and Route 23 to Egremont, a few miles from the New York State and Connecticut borders, the words were written clearly, written on tablets, words of complaint and words of justice, words of hope and

words of truth, for anyone to read. They were like unto the words given to the prophet of ancient Israel, who stood upon the city wall, watching, waiting for the justice and redemption of God.

It isn't an official US monument, that wooded lot—it is maintained by the University of Massachusetts these days, although for many years the only sign that marked it was homemade and hand-constructed. Six signposts there were on the tour we took, recording DuBois' personal history and impact. But the most profound for me was the seventh sign, marking the spot where a boulder had been placed, in remembrance. There, in smaller letters, was a quote from the dedication ceremony itself, in 1969, just six years after DuBois had died.

The words on that sign came from activist and leader Julian Bond, who had said: "The roots of the crisis are as old as the world itself, the roots involving the continued failure of the minority of the peoples in this world to share wealth and power with the majority of the world's population...."

Words worthy of the prophets like Habakkuk, Habakkuk who in a tumultuous time had written "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, "Violence!" and you will not save?"

Julian Bond's words in 1969 also spoke of violence, the violence of prolonged and structural injustice, as his dedicatory remarks continued, both clear-eyed and insistent on the possibility of a better world. Julian Bond's words: "We need to discover who is, and who isn't violent in America. Violence is black children going to school for twelve years, and receiving five years' education. Violence is (and these were the number in his time) 30 million hungry stomachs in the most affluent nation on earth." And he continued further, paraphrasing Martin Luther King JR., saying: "Violence is a country where property counts more than people. Violence is an economy that believes in socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor."

Signs, signs... I saw signposts in the woods in Great Barrington Massachusetts. But the real signpost to which they pointed was one man's life, dedicated to the liberation and dignity of all people.

II.

When we gather here at this communion table, it's a sign as well.

When we gather at Christ's communion table, there are many ways of interpreting what we are doing. For some the emphasis is a meal of sacred remembrance of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples—and yes, surely it is that. For others, we emphasize that Christ is in some very real way PRESENT at the meal, present as we eat and drink together. And surely yes, communion means that as well. And yet, as we remember the words of Habakkuk, and, even more, as we remember the radical teachings of Jesus, it seems to me that we need to remember something more—we need to remember what the ministry of Christ was all about, not just say the name of Jesus over again, nor even revel in his personal presence.

For when Jesus gathered with his disciples; and when he ate with Pharisees; and when he supped with tax collectors; when he fed the five thousand; when he was anointed by a woman he hardly knew; and when he washed the feet of other dinner guests; when he said “Let the children come to me” as his disciples tried to turn them away: he was creating a living vision for the future of all of humanity. He was writing it plain. He was writing it plain on the tablet which is the ordinary dinner table.

And so, when *we* come together to the table we come united by our savior’s conviction that salvation means bread for the hungry and drink for the thirsty. It means strangers eating together across the dividing lines of wealth and class and race. It means people gathering across the dividing lines of male and female. So, every time we share this meal, if we are faithful in the spirit of our participation, we are reminded, we get a taste of that vision of reconciling love—and of a fair share of the meal—for everyone. All human kind. Someday somehow. Today, right now.

III.

When we share this meal, we look back—we remember how Christ was crucified, and we grieve how he is crucified yet, wherever some are subjugated and others have far more than they can ever use.

But we don’t just look back—we also look forward—we write the vision on the tablets of our lives, yet again. And we consecrate not only the bread and the cup but ourselves as part of Christ’s body. We dedicate our own souls and bodies to trying to live that vision in whatever little ways we can.

We look back, and we look forward—not for the sake of nostalgia, and not to fuel unrealistic hopes—but to steady our nerves, open our hearts and offer our lives in the very real here and now.

When we leave church today—after the birthday party, don’t forget the birthday party! —when we leave the church today, each of us will be confronted sometime during the week, to share the vision of God’s love and justice. We will have an opportunity to do something or say something in a situation where there is a huge gap between the love of God and what’s ...what’s going on! Or we will have some chance to testify to the unreasonable hope we carry, we get to live the vision—and even use words, if necessary!

I am reminded that during the 1969 dedication of a little field and some woods to the memory of W.E.B DuBois, one Black man, there was great controversy with local residents. Potential trouble makers showed up, pointedly drinking as they circulated threateningly through the crowd. And yet the assembled eight hundred persisted. They persisted in an act of courageous remembrance, persisted in holding up before the Almighty and before the world the vision of one extraordinary human.

As followers of Jesus Christ, it is ours to persist as well, to write the vision we get from God, uncomfortable as that vision may be for some. It is ours to write it plain in the living of our days.

Be life short or long, on the good days and on the challenging days, that's what we are about. Naming the violence. Holding up a different kind of peace. Naming the crisis, offering the promise. Walking with the love of Christ, for every human being, for all of creation. Such lives taste like communion bread, such lives taste of the fruit of the true vine of Christ's word, the taste of the cup which is a new deal, for every child.