

EXPECTING A VISION

*a sermon by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno for Nov. 27, 2022, Advent 1
based upon Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4*

Joshua Bell, is one amazing violinist. The Oregon Symphony has featured him repeatedly over the years. He's still best known for his recording of the music for the haunting movie, THE RED VIOLIN. You may also know that Bell owns a very famous Stradivarius violin, known as the Gibson Stradivarius. It has a pretty interesting history. Made in 1713 in Cremona, Italy, it had been owned by Bronislaw Huberman, a remarkable old-school violinist of the first half of the last century. Huberman was performing a concert at Carnegie Hall in 1936. He was using a Guinarius violin for his program that evening, and had left the Strad in his dressing room. . . . then it disappeared no trace.

After a few years Huberman gave up hope of finding the instrument, and accepted a check for \$30,000 from Lloyds of London. Then, nearly 50 years later, in 1985 an old man, Julian Altman, was dying and in jail for something else. He told his wife he had a terrible secret to confess. That violin he had been playing for decades -- he had stolen it half a century before from Carnegie Hall when he worked at The Russian Bear, a restaurant right next to Carnegie Hall. He had been playing it in smoky cafés in the Washington D.C. area ever since.

He was playing it for people having anniversary suppers and birthdays and romantic rendezvous. In that time it had built up so much grime it was nearly black, but the man could not take it anywhere to be properly cleaned and properly maintained, knowing that any violin maker would recognize it as a Stradivarius immediately and would wonder why some one of his modest talent and small means could own such an instrument.

Well, his wife got quite a nice finder's fee when she let Lloyd's know where it was after her husband's death.

But, most interesting to me was the thief, Julian Altman's upbringing. His mother recognized early that he had musical talent, but she had trouble believing someone she brought into the world could amount to very much.

It's an old story. As a young man Julian Altman did what he needed to do to paly professionally. He played for the National Symphony in Washington, D.C., in fact, as well as smokey cafes.

When quizzed about her husband's childhood after his death, Altman's wife said that he told her that his mother's fondest wish for him was that one day, when he grew up, she hoped he might *steal* a really good violin.

Now we could just write her off as, you know, “the mother from hell,” but what I want to know is what conditions in this world lead people to come up with those kinds of dreams for themselves or, in this case, their children?

I don't know what that woman went through growing up -- what nightmare she faced, or her mother, or her mother's father. I'm sure that dreaming of a stealing an Italian masterpiece was somehow a very rational hope for her, Things in this world too often, just get twisted.

We all know what terrorism looks like when we see airplanes collide with tall buildings, but there are all kinds of levels of terror and each changes forever, a life, or, a family's life.

Thank heaven, most children don't have a story like Julian Altman's. But many of us carry with us wounds that will never heal; troubling things our parent's said that they don't even remember. Here's one from a woman named Valery who dreamed of being a professional singer.

I haven't had any kind of singing job – not even a piano bar – for over a year. I've been working a temp job in an office to pay my rent. I don't know. Maybe it's an impossible dream. The other night I was having dinner with my folks, and we got into my problems, and my father said, “Don't worry. You'll always be my little failure.” I'm sure he didn't realize how much it hurt, but those words really tore me apart. (Toxic Parents, Susan Forward, p. 27).

Dreams, hopes, and not knowing quite what to hope for -- I want to talk a little about that subject this morning because it is at the heart of the Old Testament scripture from the lectionary set for today.

In the morning's text, violence surrounds Jerusalem. The enemy here is Babylon (they are also known as the Chaldeans). Their skill at striking terror in the hearts of their adversaries is legendary. How is one to live in such a time?

The threat of violence from outside is tremendous, but there is also a threat of violence within the walls of Jerusalem. There is violence being carried out against widows and orphans within his city. There are endless litigations going on. All this weighs heavily on the prophet, Habakkuk.

He becomes weary to the bone. WHY DOES THIS GO ON ?? he wonders, “Why would a good God allow it? “

Now, Habakkuk is NOT tempted to doubt the existence of God. Not for a minute. No, Habakkuk retains a lively faith throughout his time of complaining. He simply cannot

understand why God, who he believes has a supreme regard for the poor and the powerless, can let unspeakable things go on.

Why doesn't God rise up and act, he wonders? Habakkuk is one of those who prays and prays for peace and sees nothing on the horizon but war.

He is like one who prays and prays for healing at the bedside of a sick loved one, and yet death keeps sticking his ugly head in the room.

Habakkuk's complaints to God are never done for the sake of complaining. He simply believes that his heart is like God's heart, huge and vulnerable. So, like all the prophets of Israel and Judah, his purpose is to incite God to action.

He waits, not resignedly, but with real resolution.

*2:1 I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what God will answer
concerning my complaint. . . Then the Lord answered me and said, Write this vision make
it plain on tablets so that even a runner may read it.*

WRITE IT BIG. Put it on a billboard so someone who is sprinting by might see it. Not a jogger. No, this is for someone who is running to his broker in order to cash everything in during a market free-fall.

Running like a man whose funeral I did 25 years ago who's first action once he found out he had lung cancer was to take everything out of his bank account and go to Reno.

Those are weak examples, really. No, the billboard sized sign is, in the end, really for anyone running away from anything because he is tempted to believe that evil, not truth, will have the last word.

God tells the prophet to write this on "tablets" of stone, so it will last. Why? Because it may well have to last long enough to be read by those who will come after, generations hence – those who will feel the same bone weariness that comes at the result of the accumulation of stress and suffering.

It's for people who are knocked down by a loved one's sickness, or death, or people who will feel acutely the threat of some act of national violence.

It's a message for people who are sick and tired of bad news. It's for people whose first prayer when they take a look at the morning news is, "How long, O Lord?"

How many wonderful people have to die of cancer before it will end ?? How many have to perish in these mass shootings that just keep coming, 3 or more in a week. Lord, how many??

How many children have to die this way before a critical mass of legislators will show some spine and buck the pressure of the gun lobby and do something to turn back this constant wave of mayhem?

*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 heard in the stalls. Yet I will
rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation. 3:17*

The words of the prophet take seriously the apostle Paul's sense that God is not some great being on some lofty throne high in the stratosphere; but is, in fact, the God "in whom we live and move and have our being."

The apostle Paul valued the wisdom of Habakkuk above anything in the Hebrew testament. He faced so many difficulties and disappointments and yet in one notable letter he quotes Habakkuk – "The just shall live by his faithfulness."
Yes, by the most basic acts of faithfulness in times of greatest stress.

How can we do this in 2022? Well, maybe by doing something as simple as choosing to vote, right? Or to bring a child into the world.

Why do it, knowing the score, as we do; knowing how hard this life can be; wondering, as we do it, what kind of world our children will inherit?

Remember, as well, what season we are now entering:. Advent. The season when we remember that God so loved the world God sent a special child to the earth when everyone who cared about justice for the little guy had just about given up hope.

Hope:

When I think of hope I often think of the late President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat.

Remember when he flew to Israel in the late 1970s in hope of making a lasting peace with Israel. Golda Meier was Prime Minister in Israel then. They were interviewed together on television. It was one of the most remarkable things I've ever seen.

She playfully reminded him that he had once years before spoken to the press, referring to her as "that mean old lady."

He blushed hearing that; very embarrassed.

She offered him a wrapped package -- a present for his granddaughter His first grandchild. The baby had been born the morning he had flown out of Egypt. He hadn't seen her yet.

Golda Meier said, "I have many grandchildren. You could see Sadat's lower lip tremble as he received it from her hand.

Sadat had known the risk he took going to Israel. He knew he had very likely signed his death warrant (which, in fact, he had). But he also knew that he had to do it so his grandchildren would have hope for peace.

Hope – real hope, is always *first* about the grandchildren. Always. Whether you have any or not. Hear again the words of the prophet:

3:17 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.

Acts of faithfulness. Sometimes we have little choice but to be faithful.

The late, Rob Proudfoot, a professor at my alma mater, the University of Oregon traveled to Vietnam 30 years ago. He spoke with many people, none so interesting as an ancient woman who was living with five generations of her family in their village in the North near Hanoi.

Proudfoot said her, "Tell me your story,"

It's simple really," she said: "In the 1930s The Chinese came and they burned my house and we went to the hills and then we came back and rebuilt it.

Then in the 40s the Japanese came and they burned my house and we went to the hills and then we came back and rebuilt it.

Then the 50s came and with that, the French, and they burned my house and we went to the hills and then we came back and we rebuilt it.

And then in the 60s the Americans came and they burned my house again and we went to the hills and then we came back and rebuilt it.

When are we going to learn to live together??

Proudfoot asked her if she thought that would ever be possible and she said,

"Well, I keep rebuilding my house, so I guess that means I think it can happen."

Vietnam – a patient place. And now we all love Pho. Vietnamese beef noodle soup.

Most things takes 8 times longer than we expect.

In the meantime what are we to do ??

The text for today from Habakkuk says, "Stay at your post." Be vigilant, not a vigilante. Just be vigilant. Make plans and execute them.

Be like the Beavers yesterday, down three touchdowns in the fourth quarter and yet not out. One rushing play at a time.

Keep watch. Do the work your hand finds to do. Do your duty as you know it.

And look for those movements when the hand of God is breaking through.

If you have eyes to see it you will see justice aching to be born.

You could see it in the results of this last election. Lots of wonderful independent minded American voters who love this country, went to the polls from coast to coast.

Natural born conservatives, they cast their votes for integrity, refusing to vote for candidates who were pushing whacko conspiracy theories and big lies.

The big wave happened in the middle – those sensible folks who knew what they had to do.

God bless them, they keep hope alive; they keep hope alive for us and our grandchildren; in big things and little; in things global and in things right here, close to home. In this way they are showing us how to live faithfully, one day at a time.

Amen.