***Pastoral Prayer***

God of the saints -- those mothers and fathers of our faith who taught and practiced and modeled the faith so that we, too, might walk among them by your spirit -- we give you thanks for all those witnesses on whose shoulders we stand. We give you thanks for their example, their honest courage, their prayerful thoughtfulness, and their humble willingness to look the fool amidst a culture driven by very different values and ideals. By their mentoring, would that we have the strength to be similarly foolish.

In that way, we not only offer thanksgivings for our elders, but prayers as well for our children -- indeed for any who might happen within our circle of influence -- that they might hear in our words something of your voice; see in our living something of your Way; recognize in our choosing and our investments something of your heart. May we be your living letters of recommendation.

In that spirit we pray for those in particular times of need -- the drifting, the searching, the ill and the grieving. Bless them, we pray, with your attending presence, enfleshed when opportune by our physical presence.

As wisps of your great cloud of witnesses, we pray that you will bless this church -- its commitments, its example, its leaders -- that all we attempt be grounded in and animated by your coming reign as we have glimpsed it in Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray: Our father...

***Writing the Vision***

November 3, 2013

Text Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it:

God, how long do I have to cry out for help

before you listen?

How many times do I have to yell, “Help! Murder! Police!”

before you come to the rescue?

Why do you force me to look at evil,

stare trouble in the face day after day?

Anarchy and violence break out,

quarrels and fights all over the place.

Law and order fall to pieces.

Justice is a joke.

The wicked have the righteous hamstrung

and stand justice on its head.

What’s God going to say to my questions? I’m braced for the worst.

I’ll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon.

I’ll wait to see what God says,

how he’ll answer my complaint.

Full of Self, but Soul-Empty

And then God answered: “Write this.

Write what you see.

Write it out in big block letters

so that it can be read on the run.

This vision-message is a witness

pointing to what’s coming.

It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait!

And it doesn’t lie.

If it seems slow in coming, wait.

It’s on its way. It will come right on time.

“Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—

full of himself but soul-empty.

But the person in right standing before God

through loyal and steady believing

is fully alive, really alive.

Durley Godbolt was a rich and arrogant thug. The perennial nemesis in Willie Morris’ last book, *Taps*, Durley was the scion of the local plantation owner who dominated this small, fictional Mississippi town during the days of the Korean War. If his dad intimidated the townfolk, Durley mostly repulsed them, continually rubbing, as he did, his strength and swagger in their faces. When Durley married the town sweatheart and piano teacher, who had grown up in humble circumstances, everyone was jealous of his “acquisition” of this beautiful and delicate flower. When he quickly grew aloof from her and even abused her, those who knew of it cradled her, sympathized with her, and quietly despised him for his evil. When he was drafted, everyone was relieved to see him go, and when he was reported missing in action, no one wept on his behalf. And in his absence, when his wife became secretly and romantically involved with Luke, the likable town war hero, those who were privy to the knowledge quietly cheered her newfound happiness.

But to everyone’s surprise – or perhaps to no one’s surprise, given the kind of man he was – Durley survived the war and ultimately returned home, a bit older, perhaps, but none the wiser nor gentler nor more humane. But he somehow sensed his wife’s diffidence at resuming their life together. Her involvement with Luke had not been common knowledge – they had been discreet, excruciatingly careful. But, then again, how could she conceal such a thing? Durley could see it in her eyes, feel it in the way she took her breaths, smell it in her sighs. Somehow Durley knew; and somehow, someway, Durley knew who.

And one quiet night, a dog outside Luke’s secluded cabin in the woods began to bark, only to be explosively silenced. The front door was splintered, there were shotgun blasts, and Luke, the war hero; Luke the lover, was left dead where the bullets had found him.

No one was ever charged with the murder. No one ever brought to justice, though no one doubted who was to blame. And Durley Godbolt went on to prosper, inheriting his father’s fortune and using it to expand his own, without ever, presumably, so much as a sleepless night.

“Why do the wicked prosper?” the prophet asked of God – and do we not, as well? We’ve known too many Durley’s in our day – ones, perhaps, less lethal in their application, but no less ruthless and corrupt – to believe it doesn’t happen. We’ve known the businessman who cleverly cheats his customers and smirks at his illicit profits. We’ve known the bully who insisted on and regularly got his way – whether it was a sandwich on the playground or a developer who got special consideration. And, to be sure, we’ve seen some of them get their due. But we’ve seen too many of them get, instead, their way – leaving footprints on the heads of those weaker; figuratively, if not literally, getting away with murder. “Why do the wicked prosper?”

In this post-September 11, post-Bernie Madoff, post-AIG, post-BP world, we not only grieve the pain and the loss that’s been inflicted, we also rail at the idea that anyone who could be behind such misery inflicted, who could conceive and set in motion or simply ignore such devastating sequences of events, could not only be immensely wealthy, but lovingly revered, in the case of Osama bin Laden, duped, in the case of Madoff, and still invested in the case of myriad companies like BP. “Why do the wicked prosper?” we, like the prophet, want to know. How can God let things get so twisted, so misshapen, so horrendously out of whack?

It wasn’t, for the prophet, a rhetorical or philosophical question. Standing defiantly high in the watchtower of his mind, the world that he saw around him seemed similarly contorted and fiendishly distorted. Living, perhaps, sometime in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C., this palace prophet watched as the powerful and ruthless Babylonian army swept aside Judah’s defenses and those of Judah’s neighbors. “These people don’t care about you,” Habakkuk declared to God. “Yes, it’s true that we, your chosen people, are no stranger to sin, ourselves. But how could you allow an even ***more*** sinful people to oppress us?

“And how long are you going to let this go on?” the prophet asked of God. “How long am I going to have to cry for help to an ear that chooses not to listen? How long will we have to speak about violence to an arm that will not lift itself in our defense? Why do you make me look at wrongdoing and trouble? Destruction and violence are everywhere. Rage and contention are bubbling over. The law grows weak and justice never seems to prevail. The wicked have a stranglehold on the righteous and judgment comes forth perverted. How long are you going to allow us – if not force us – to languish here in the gap between the twisted way things are and the way you intend them to be? Why do you let this happen, and how long are we going to have to endure it?”

Admittedly, we are walking on delicate ground. Admittedly, wickedness may, at times, be in the eyes of the beholder. Placing ourselves high on a ladder of virtue is a dangerous flirtation with arrogance. And yet surely we have some reasonable basis for judgment.

· **Surely** steps taken to dishonestly profit at the unwitting expense of others or in violation of the laws of the land are self-evidently wrong.

· **Surely** actions that demean and take unfair advantage of the less powerful or less astute are evil regardless of whatever larger ends they may be intended to serve.

· **Surely** justice perverted or honor smeared or greed heedlessly fed can agreeably be counted as evil.

· **Surely** actions that inflict pain and suffering or snuff the living breath of innocents are intrinsically evil, no matter how noble are the intentions of the perpetrators.

· And **surely** we – along with all people of good intent – have a right to want and expect something better.

“I am going to take my place on the watchtower, station myself on the rampart, and keep watch to see what kind of an answer you, God, will give me.” It is, I think, a powerful picture: this anguished, tormented man of faith staring into the dim unknown, trying to figure out, not simply what’s going in the world, but why – and where is God in it; trusting, in his own way, the promise that Jesus was to make so many centuries later: “ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

And Habakkuk did, in a way, receive. The door was, after a fashion, opened to reveal an answer that was both reassuring and challenging. “Write this down,” God instructed the prophet. “Make it a billboard with big letters so that anyone hurrying by can still read it. The message is that there still is a vision for the appointed time; it truthfully speaks of the end – it does not lie. Nothing has gotten in its way – no tree has fallen in its path to impede its progress, no opposing force has overpowered it. It’s still coming. The time of God’s fulfillment is ‘panting’ like a runner speeding toward the finish line. Wait for it – it will surely come.”

It wasn’t an accounting. It wasn’t, perhaps, the explanation the prophet had sought. The response was conspicuously absent of answers. But, somehow it was something more important; something reassuring in a way that people like us, off balance in our own way and for our own reasons, can use. Along with the prophet, we, too, have inherited a vision of God’s design that bears little resemblance to the world we see. We share the prophet’s relentless displeasure with injustice and the inroads of the hateful and dishonest; we share his edgy impatience for the order that God intends. But we also share his limited perspective of the turning of the world and the path along which God is moving it. “Of that day or that hour,” Jesus reminded his questioners, “no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Creator of us all” (Mark 13:32).

What we, and the prophet alike, received, in addition to welcome reassurance, is the reminder that the righteous – those who have given themselves over to God’s own use and direction; those who have staked their life on the notion that God is God and is even now moving us closer to God’s own breast – do not finally live by answers, but by faith. Even on the run – whether a run for cover or a run for the next appointment – the faithful can have, by the assurance of God, deep and steadying patience...

...And just enough faithful determination and tenacious “pluck” to “write the vision” big enough that anyone can see; that despite all the evidence to the contrary, like winter giving way to spring, God’s way will ***yet*** flower, and prosper, and the world God seeks will be the world we have.

Write it – big, and bold, and plain.