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### How Long?

One thing I can say about living in this chunk of history is that it is quite interesting. Very interesting personally for me: opportunities that have opened up for me in the last several years and chances to learn and grow and wonderful people who have come into my life. But also, and I think more importantly, very interesting for all of us in the ways that history is unfolding.

I find myself going back and forth between, on the one hand, enormous gratitude - how wonderful to be alive and be a part of this wonderful world - such beauty and resources and friends and learning and growing and healing. Etc. On the other hand I find myself experiencing apprehension, insecurity, and often anger and fear about the way many things are going. I find myself thinking and even saying out loud to myself: **WE CAN DO BETTER THAN THIS!! HERE WE ARE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY. WE ARE THE RECIPIENTS OF HUGE SOURCES OF WISDOM - AND LOOK AT WHAT WE ARE DOING!!** We live, do we not, in a time in which there are many disturbing, frightening, and heartbreaking things taking place.

And that takes us right into the cry of Habakkuk, our Old Testament text for this morning. (It was written about a period of over 2500 years ago.) Habakkuk cries out directly to GOD asking “HOW LONG? HOW LONG?”

“How long must we live in this corruption, injustice, abuse of power, and oppression? God, did you notice [I am paraphrasing] that righteous people (good guys) experiencing bad stuff, while the not so righteous ones seem to be doing pretty well. How long?”

I find myself asking “How long?” about many things and I bet you do too. Part of my list includes:

1. War and its consequences. I was particularly attuned to this in watching the PBS series on WWII, and of course news of the current war. I think of those injured, killed, traumatized, and resources expended through war and I cry “HOW LONG?” In the 20<sup>th</sup> century over 160,000,000 persons died in war, most of whom were civilians.

How long?

2. Child Mortality. The statistics are astonishing to me on this. I'll give you one figure. Every year, the UN tells us, over 10,000,000 children die of malnutrition and preventable disease. That comes to over 35,000 children dying each day of malnutrition and preventable disease. How long?

3. Economic well being. Nearly one in four persons (about 1.3 billion) live on the equivalent of less than 1 dollar per day. HOW LONG?

4. The case studies in inhumanity to humans pouring forth from Myanmar and Darfur. How Long?
5. The young persons lost to drugs, gangs, crime, and violence, How long?
6. Institutions ostensibly designed to serve “we the people” - doing something very different. How long?
7. Finally the amazing amount and degree of Isolation and Loneliness and that people experience. And you do not have to go to a third world country to find that. How long?

But notice that in our Old Testament text Habakkuk is not just offering a complaint that these things are happening - he goes a step further in boldly asking: (Again I paraphrase here.)

“Where are you, God, in all this? Do you not hear the cries of your people? Will you help?”

Habakkuk spoke directly with GOD and God replied directly to Habakkuk. That does not seem to be as reliable for me as it was for Habakkuk. So I have decided try to contact God in a little different way. I'll try to email God. Maybe that will work better.

I have a draft of an email to God. I think it may need a little refinement before I send it - maybe some of you could help me with that , but anyway here is my draft:

“Hi God. How is it going? I need to get right to the point. There are a lot of heartbreaking and terribly disturbing things taking place on this planet. I'm sure you are aware of that and know much more about it than I do. Lots of us are asking how long we are going to have to put up with that. Here is the deal. If you are merciful and loving and powerful and all that, why don't you stop those things from happening? And along with stopping them from happening, couldn't you give us a little more help in getting them straightened out when they do happen? Won't you help us out? I am curious - do you have the power to help us with such things but decide not to use it? Or is it that you are aware of the problems and would like to help, but you are not able to do so? I, along with a lot of other folks, would appreciate your sending us some answers on these matters. An email response would be just fine. There are other questions I have, but let's start with this issue.

Respectfully,  
Jack Dison

P.S. God, I am wondering if you might need some administrative assistance to help you along these lines. I'd be happy to volunteer my services. I can give you what I think you will find to be good guidance on what needs to be done and how to go about it. I can also help you set up some time parameters or even deadlines if that would be helpful. Just let me know.

OK as I said it's a rough draft and needs a little work before I send it. I also face the problem of

finding a good email address. But if all that comes together and I get a reply, I'll let you know so you can put it in your parish newsletter.

Of course I am joking about the email, but H gives voice to questions which have been asked for centuries, and which we still raise today. There is an entire branch of theology devoted to these issues. It is called theodicy - asking where are you in these troubling matters, God? How long, how long?

Here is what I would say to you (and to me) about that.

First: There are things about God and how God operates that are way beyond our understanding. In the book of Job God asks "Where were you, little human being, when I created the heavens and the earth?" There is a great difference between God's intention and action and our ability to understand.

A cat once taught me a lesson about this. I had a cat who thought he was the center of the universe, if not the king of the universe. It seemed to me that he thought he knew everything worth knowing. I knew that he did not know everything - he was a fine cat, but I knew that he was extremely arrogant and pretty stupid about all kinds of things. It occurs to me that if there is that degree of difference in awareness and wisdom between a cat and me, how much greater is that distance between God and me?

If God ever did respond to my highly arrogant and pretty ignorant email to him - I think (and this is entirely in my imagination) that God would say something like: "Keep in mind that I am God and you are not God! As much as you would like to have awareness and even certainty about me and what I do, that is way beyond you. You are a finite and temporal being, you are neither infinite nor eternal. Don't forget that!"

Secondly, I would say that God gives us the ability and freedom to make decisions - God lets us do good if we choose, foolishness if we choose, and destruction and harm if we choose, and allows us to do evil if we choose. That applies not only to individual decisions but also collective decisions - what some social scientists refer to as the "social construction of reality." For example we can collectively set up social, political, economic institutions which contribute enormously to outcomes like 35,000 preventable deaths of children each day or we can collectively choose to do otherwise. That apparently is the way the human condition is set up.

Again in my imagination I wonder if God might respond to my highly arrogant and pretty ignorant email in part in this way: "Let me ask you how long? I have given you freedom to make choices. I have given you enormous resources and abilities and opportunities to set institutions up in ways help and support and nourish and protect all of my people, but so far you have not done that. To say the least you have not done that. I ask you 'How Long?' How long indeed!"

Thirdly: A key point, if not the key point, of the teaching of Jesus is that there is **good news**. But there is no promise that there will not be bad news (look at life and times of Jesus). Although there will be bad news; there also is good news.

Part of the Good news is that God will be with us and for us in those most difficult of times. There is no promise that God is going to intervene as we would like or hope and when we would like or hope, but that God - yes the God who created and sustains the universe - will stand with us and be with us no matter what happens. I have experienced that in my life and I bet you have as well.

And there is that part of the good news that tells us this: Good news comes in the midst of and out of bad news. Resurrection follows crucifixion. As one person eloquently and succinctly stated it: "It gets darker and darker, and then Jesus is born."

Another part of the good news in language that has deep meaning for us, we can live by faith. That is the heart of God's reply to Habakkuk. Habakkuk says to God "All this terrible stuff is taking place and what are you going to do about it?" God says to Habakkuk "Live by faith." To live by faith is to open ourselves to God's love, grace, support and to respond appropriately. A key component of faith is that we trust God. As the Psalmist says at several points: My trust is in you. In you will I trust.

And fortunately, on the matter of faith - as today's text from Luke tells us, we do not have to have tons of faith. We do not have to have a train load of faith, or even a bushel basket of faith or even a spoonful of faith. Jesus tells us that a tiny amount of faith, faith the size of a mustard seed, can make a big difference.

To live by faith is to trust God even in those most heartbreaking and frightening episodes and realities of life. In faith we live as best we can relying on the grace and guidance that we receive from God. In faith we live as best we can in response to God's invitation to a life of love - loving God and loving our neighbor.

It seems to me, this has huge implications for what we do with ourselves and our time and our resources. We could spend much of our time stewing about how bad things are and why doesn't God, or if not God, someone do something about it. Or we could, day by day, as best we can find our way to live a life grounded in faith, a life based on trusting God, relying on God's grace and guidance, and in responding to God's various invitations. As important as it is to become aware of and sensitive to the brokenness of this world and to hear the cries which come from that brokenness, we don't have to stop there, we don't have to get stuck there.

I am convinced that we can, all of us, become invigorated and transformed through God's grace by faith and then get going on God's work as best we can. Archbishop Tutu often says "God needs us. Of course we need God, but God also needs us - to become the arms and legs and hands to do what God needs to have done."

And what exactly is it that God wants us to do? Well that's a big topic, but what I would say to you in brief is this: Get more and more into a life of faith as best you can, and ask God for guidance, and bingo it will become clear to you how you can contribute to God's kingdom right in the middle of this world and this period of history in which there is so much heartbreaking and disturbing news. And I would not be surprised if your place in all that has something to do with bringing a measure of reconciliation and healing to life spaces where there is brokenness and alienation; bringing light to places of darkness. I would not be surprised if your place in all that

has to do with addressing conditions that produce heartbreaking and disturbing news.

So that gives us a whole new spin, does it not, on the question of “How Long?”

How Long? As long as it takes.

How Long? As long as we have.

How Long? As long as God reaches gently to us and invites us to the Banquet.