

“Habakkuk: Watchpost, Tablets and Vision”
January 27, 2019
Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church
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Habakkuk 2:1-4 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

God’s Reply to the Prophet’s Complaint

2 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 Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
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.
⁴ Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

In the early morning hours of July 4, 1985, a young woman entered the waters off Santa Catalina Island and began swimming for the California coast. Her name was Florence Chadwick and her goal was to become the first woman to swim the Catalina Channel. Long distance swimming was not new to her since she had been the first woman to swim the English Channel and she had accomplished this feat in both directions.

As she began her swim several obstacles stood in her way. The fog hanging over the waters was so thick that you could cut it with a knife. The water was so cold it would chill you to the bone and leave you numb. Sharks were swimming all around her and had to be scared off by gunfire from the boats that accompanied her. After fifteen hours and fifty-five minutes Florence Chadwick was taken out of the water, having failed to accomplish her goal. Later she learned that at that time she was only one-half mile from land.

As she reflected upon her experience Florence said it was not the cold water or the intense fatigue or the sharks that caused her to give up her journey. The fog alone was responsible. It had blinded her eyes and caused her mind and heart to lose sight of the goal. Because she was unable to see the finish line her journey came to a sad end. She was defeated for lack of vision. The haunting words from Proverbs seem to apply to Florence -- “Where there is no vision the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV)

The truth that Florence Chadwick learned in the chilly waters of the Catalina Channel is a lesson that we need to consider today. Without a vision for what lies ahead a church will fail to be all that it can be in the name of Jesus Christ. Without a personal vision for where God wants you and your family to be, we will miss out on the blessings God wants to share with us. On this morning we would do well to consider what it means to see God's vision for us and our church.

I.

We begin with a simple question, "What is a vision?" Everywhere we turn these days we hear this word. Businesses that thrive have a sense of vision. Go to any book store and you will find numerous books on the subject of vision.

Definitions may vary, but a vision is a picture of the future for any organization, individual, or group. It is an image of what lies ahead which helps give direction and focus. It is a preferred blueprint for the future. This vision creates a long-range sense of purpose and energy for all who share the vision. Perhaps an athlete said it best. The greatest hockey player of recent years is named Wayne Gretzky. He commented, "Most hockey players skate to where the puck is. I skate to where the puck is going to be." That is the essence of vision!

History is filled with examples of people who had a vision for the future. Henry Ford had a vision of an affordable automobile for people to buy. Steve Jobs had a vision of a personal desk-top computer and his vision revolutionized the computer industry. The founders of our country had a vision of a nation governed by democracy and we continue to live out of that vision today. You could add your names to this list of people who shared their vision with the world and who, in turn, helped the world become a better place.

Just as history is filled with examples of visionary leaders it is also true that many have exhibited an amazing lack of vision. Did you know that Charles H. Duell, director of the U. S. Patent Office said, "Everything that can be invented has been invented." And that was in 1899! What about President Grover Cleveland who commented in 1905 that "Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote." Then there was the baseball great Tris Speaker who said in 1921, "(Babe) Ruth made a big mistake when he gave up pitching."

But how does vision apply to a church? Is it the same thing as you might find in business or is it different? A vision for the church comes from the mind and the heart of God. In fact, if you were reading the scripture passage from the New International Version you will notice that the word often translated vision was rendered "revelation" in the NIV. This word is appropriate for it reminds us that the vision for a church is not a human invention but is a divine revelation for us to see and to hear. This vision builds on the past and the present, but it always looks to the future. As Christians we are to believe that God holds the future. Therefore, we can also trust God to know the best direction and plan for the church in the days and years that lie ahead. Each church has a distinct vision for her future. All churches have the same mission to minister in the name of Jesus Christ but the vision for our church might be distinctly different from that of other churches in different locations with varying gifts composed of different people.

Vision discussions are bubbling up all around our church these days:

- Our pastor began the discussion a few months ago when he offered some ministry dreams for the future.
- A few days ago, the Deacons spent a full Saturday dreaming about the future vision for the church.
- Our Children's Ministry took the fall exploring new models for ministry today and in the future.
- Our Youth ministry has claimed a new name of "Refuge" and living into what that means for ministry in the future.
- The Young Adults are transitioning from the staff leadership of Tim Boone to the leadership of Josh Scott, exploring new dreams of what ministry might look like in the future.
- Even today, we have a Church in Conference – which will involve exploring God's future for our church.
- The list could go on.

What about your personal or family vision? What is the picture of your future as God is leading you? Where are you going with that?

II.

How do we see the vision? Return to our scripture passage for the day to find an answer to this question. While we do not know very much about Habakkuk we do know that he was a prophet of God in times of crisis. Shortly before the fall of Judah in 586 BC he was speaking for God. Unlike some of the prophets we have been studying, his words that have been recorded in the book that bears his name were not directed to his own people with tones of judgment and calls to repentance. Instead, his words were directed to God with doubts, questions, and lament. The first chapter of Habakkuk tells that enemy nations were causing the Hebrews to struggle and suffer. Habakkuk raises questions about the sovereignty of God in the midst of struggle. He wants to know why God is allowing events to occur. He looked around him and saw trouble and pain. What he needed was a vision of God's future. As he moves through his own struggles, God gives Habakkuk a model for our vision quest.

Watch – It almost sounds too simple to be true, but seeing the vision for our church, our lives, and our families begins when we watch. Habakkuk described how he climbed his watch tower in an effort to watch to see what God would do. "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." (v. 1) This action shows his need for a sense of perspective. The day-to-day routine of life can so crowd our thinking and acting that it prevents us from looking clearly into the future. Just as a forest ranger must climb a tower to get above the thicket of trees in order to see what is coming on the horizon, so the prophet decided that he needed some distance and perspective from the routine of life in order to catch a glimpse of what God is going to do in the future. In the church it is so easy to get caught up in preparing for the next Sunday that we have no sense of perspective in looking ahead to envision our church on a Sunday morning, five, ten, or fifteen years from now. In our personal lives we make it day to day. To be

honest, most of us do not spend enough time on the watch tower probing the mind of God concerning the future. We often dwell in the halls of yesterday or in the immediate needs of today. Habakkuk calls us to a sense of perspective that allows us the chance to gaze into tomorrow.

There is something else about watching that Habakkuk teaches us. Not only did he have a sense of perspective, but he approached his watch with a sense of anticipation. Listen as he writes, “I will keep watch to see what he will say to me ...” (v. 1) He went to the watch tower fully expecting for God to do something in his life. This was not a routine habit or a vain attempt at spiritual piety. Instead it was a true act of faith with full expectation that God would give something for him to see and hear. When an individual or a church approaches time for God with that sense of expectation and anticipation for what God is going to do in our lives, then we are on our way to catching the vision of God’s future for our lives.

Write – A vision is not a mysterious dream only in the mind of the visionary. To be effective a vision must be a shared vision. This means that there needs to be a sense of clarity for the vision to be absorbed by others. It must be definable or else it really is not a vision. If it cannot be put into words, then it is not a vision yet. Habakkuk understood this as he learned from God these words, “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets. ...” (v. 2) Then God offered the very practical advice that it be written in such a way that “...so that a runner may read it.” What was meant by that? First of all, the vision is to be made simple. Keep it simple enough so that one who is running can read and understand what you are writing. Most vision statements from organizations today are brief, simple, to the point so that even the runner could read it. We do not need to research pages of documents in order to come to an understanding of a vision. It needs to be clear and concise and simple.

There is something else about his instruction to write. Not only should the words be kept simple, they should be inspirational. A vision should so motivate those who accept it that they are propelled to run with energy and endurance to help the vision become reality. Therefore, the instruction is not only to keep the vision simple so it can be understood and internalized by all, but God’s vision should motivate the church and individual people to an excitement and enthusiasm that we are willing to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1)

Wait – A vision is not a program or a statement that a church or an individual or a family can simply work out in a matter of days. In fact, it is not something that can be scheduled neatly into a calendar. God’s instruction to Habakkuk was to wait for the vision. In verse three God said, “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.” When Christians are seeking God’s vision this is more than just setting goals or doing long-range planning. Those things come later as a means of accomplishing the vision. Patience is required to wait for God’s timing in the sharing of vision with the people of the church.

Let me return to the chilly waters of the Catalina Channel to share with you the rest of the story about Florence Chadwick. While her first attempt to swim failed because the fog blurred her vision, two months later she tried again. At that time the fog was no longer there, and she

was able to see the goal ahead of her which allowed her not only to finish the swim but to beat the men's record by two hours! The wonderful difference was her vision!

III.

God was instructing Habakkuk about the power of vision. It does make a difference – and we can learn the important lessons God was teaching his prophet. But there is something else God wants us to know. As important as vision is, there are times we just do not see very well. We don't have a clear picture of God's future for our lives – we are filled with more questions than answers. This was true for Habakkuk. The entire first chapter of this book is a string of questions and complaints that Habakkuk offered up to God. He just did not know why the judgment of God was coming to the people of Judah at the hands of the Chaldeans (Babylonians). They were even worse, or more evil, than the people of God had been. Life did not seem fair, and Habakkuk did not understand what God was doing.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever bumped into this in real life? In the challenges with your family, your job, your friends, your relationship with God – you come to the point where you don't see what comes next. You don't see God at work in your life. You don't see what your future should be.

Faith is when we trust in the God we cannot see. Or, as God said to Habakkuk – “but the righteous live by their faith.” (v. 4) The New Testament echoes this same idea. “We walk by faith not by sight.” (2 Cor. 5:7) That sounds a lot like another great verse about faith. Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Not by sight – conviction of things not seen. That is how the “righteous live by their faith.” But how does that work when we cannot see our way forward?

During the terrible days of the bombing Blitz over London during WWII, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as fast as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, “I can't see you!” The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings called to the silhouette of his son, “But I can see you. Jump!” The boy jumped, because he trusted his father.

Christian faith allows us to face life not because we can see, but with the certainty that we are seen; not that we know all the answers, but that we are known.

Faith is trusting the God we cannot see. We are the little boy calling out into the darkness. Our Father is invisible – calling us to follow. We may hear God's voice – in the Bible, in the music, in our prayers, in the still small voice that speaks to our hearts. But we do not see God. It surely would be easier if we could. But it would not be faith. Faith is trusting in the God we cannot see. It is trusting that in the darkness God does see us – does see down that road into the future – does know the plans for our future that God has for us.

That is faith. As Elton Trueblood said, “Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations.” That word “trust” is the best way to understand how we can live when we don’t see very well, when we are not clear about a vision for the future. We live by faithfulness, and when we cannot see our way forward, we trust that God sees and that we will follow even when we do not fully understand.

Clarity is about seeing, and sometimes we do not see clearly. We walk by faith, and not by sight, remember. Our confidence does not come because we understand everything with great clarity. Our confidence comes because we have chosen to take a walk with Jesus --- and we trust that he knows where we are going – because he is already there. Along the way there is so much that we do not see or understand, but we can trust in the fact that even when we don’t see it all – we are seen, and loved, and protected. So, with great confidence, we walk by faith and not by sight.

Habakkuk began to understand and proclaim this by the end of the book. The third chapter is a beautiful poetic prayer to God.

The book ends with these words:

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,
¹⁸ **yet I will rejoice in the LORD;**
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ **GOD, the Lord, is my strength;**
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.^[a]

God invites us to come to the watchpost, to wait for the vision that God has for each one of us and for our church. Will you watch closely to see what God wants for our future? And in that time that we cannot see clearly, that questions seem to be greater than the answers, we can trust in the faithfulness of God who does see us and who leads us into the future. So, we watch, and wait and pray the words of the hymn . . .

Open my eyes that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free:
Silently now I wait for thee,
Ready, my God, thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!