

October 30, 2022
Shenandoah Smoke
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4*
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
The Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Detroit

May the God who creates us, redeems us and sustains us be with us this
day and always; Amen.
(Please be seated.)
Good Morning!

Fall may almost have arrived.
I thought so
when the other day
I smelled the smoke
from a fireplace
as I was walking back from an evening romp in the local park with Tali,
my Australian Shepherd.
I inhaled
 and my soul quieted within me.
I have long associated
the smell of a wood burning fire
—as a sign
 of *all being right with the world*.
This may or may not be
because none of the houses
I grew up in
had a fireplace.
So for me—
leaves or wood burning
was the scent of a special occasion.
I associate it with being outdoors,
being safe,
 and being with my family.

As a child when we lived in Virginia
—one of our favored, special events—
was--
having gone to bed
 particularly early the night before—
when my father
 would wake my brother Kevin and I up
at what he called, “0-dark Thirty.”
Then with the help of my mother,
bundle us into the back
of the Rambler station wagon
with sleeping bags and pillows,
 Marine Corps Sweat Shirts
 and a thermos of hot cocoa.
We’d then drive
 two and half hours
 to the Blue Ridge Mountains:
an interminably long drive
for a five and six year old
—but far easier to tolerate
if most of the trip
was spent sipping cocoa
and sleeping in the back
of the still dark station wagon.
Upon arriving—
we’d wake to the sun rising
 atop multicolored trees.
We’d stop to fill our canteens
in the fresh spring along the parkway.
Then because we were competitive “*picnickers*,”
we’d be the first ones
to the choice spot—
and claim a wedge
of the large open-air, stone fireplace
that had a roof but no walls.

Kevin and I would
set up our sleeping bags—
on the benches of the stone walls
that partitioned the fireplaces one from another.

We'd gather
kindling and wood for the fire.
Dad would build the fire,
put a pot of our spring water
on to boil
make us each a cup of tea.
Then—over the campfire
—on the big cast iron gratings—
in the “Dutch” oven-
-Dad would make breakfast
and Kevin and I
would snuggle down in our sleeping bags.

The smell of
 burning bacon and eggs
 and fried potatoes,
coupled with the pungent smell of burning pine
 —made the fall perfume
—which if I could—
bottle and sell—I would call
 “Shenandoah Smoke.”
When I catch a whiff of this scent
—I'm automatically transported
to that sacred time—
that holy time— that God time
—when all was right with the world.

What memory for you
 —does that?
Is there a smell
 that comforts you?

What makes you feel safe?

The prophet Habakkuk
 is looking
 for that which can
 make him feel right
 with the world.
 There is no campfire smoke
 to comfort his soul.

He lives in a time—
 when it seems as if
 the bad guys are winning
 and the evil ones are prospering.

*He says to God,
 “Hello! How long
 will I cry to you
 and you will not listen?
 Or cry to you, “Violence!”
 and you will not save?
 ...Destruction and violence
 are before me,
 strife and contention arise.
 So the law becomes slack
 and justice never prevails.
 The wicked surround the righteous...Hello!”*

Here is a time
 —right before
 the Babylonians invade Judah
 around 600 BCE.
 Here is a time when everything
 that Habakkuk holds to be dear—
 may well wind up
 rolled in the mud

and trampled underfoot.

He is appalled with the actions of his own people,
 his leaders, his government
 —he is fearful of the invasion
 that looms on the horizon.

Nothing feels settled
 —nothing feels right.

Although he is surrounded by evil
 —he also knows of good,
 God-fearing, God-loving,
 Torah-living people.

He knows well of the people
 who have up-held God’s commandments.

What he cannot understand—
 is why is it—
 that these good ones suffer also?

Why is it
 that the faithful ones
 are not being spared by the God
 who has chosen them?

So unlike many other prophets
 who tend to speak

God’s word to the people
 —Habakkuk—speaks

the people’s word to God.

Habakkuk is the faithful prophet
 —who looks at the inadequacies,
 and inequities of the world and asks God,
 “Why aren’t you doing more to fix this
 —and assist us—your chosen ones?”

He says, “Where are you God?”

Explain your actions—
 as Eugene Peterson writes in the Message,

“You can’t condone evil!
 So why don’t you do something about this?
 Why are you silent now?
 This outrage!
 Evil men swallow up the righteous
 and you stand around and watch?”

Or as Woody Allen put it 2500 years later
 —“OH I believe in God.
 I believe in God,
 I just think God is something of an underachiever.”
 What are you doing God?
 Habakkuk then says,
 having ask God the question.
 Having said,
 “Where in heaven’s name are you
 and why are you letting an evil nation
 take its revenge on us
 —a God fearing people?”
 Where are you GOD?

Then unlike many of us
 —who will utter these words
 and then return to our lives
 as they were before
 —absorbed in what we can see—
 Habakkuk—does not utter empty questions.
 He of all prophets—
 sets himself up to hear the answer—
 to be ready for God.
 refuses to lose himself
 in the day to day grind.
 Instead he reformats everything and says,
 “It is as if
 I am a soldier at a post—

gracious God.

I will stand at the rampart—
with my eyes open
and my ears cocked.”

He waits and he listens.

All senses attuned to where God might be.

He makes it his sole job
—to wait for God’s answer.

It is in the waiting
and the praying
that his life shifts.

It is then—that he sees God all around.

He sees and hears God’s promise.

It is like that great C.S. Lewis quote,
where he says,

“I don’t pray to change God—
I pray to change me.”

In Habakkuk’s
waiting his eyes and ears are opened—
and he is drawn
to that GOD- time—
as sure as the smell of wood smoke
brings me back
to the mountains of my childhood.

Habakkuk
listens and waits
and hears God say to him,

“Write this vision—
make it plain and in
big block letters
on the tablets

so that a runner going by can see it.
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, its on its way—it will come in God's time.”

Fall is coming. Smoke is in the air. God is here.
Amen.