



9. Hope

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe God isn't finished.

In this session, participants will consider the Presbyterian belief that God isn't finished through study of

- Habakkuk 1:1–4 and 2:1–3
- Exodus 20:1–17
- Isaiah 11:6–9
- Jeremiah 31:33–34
- Revelation 21:3–6

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
God of Justice,
we sometimes grow weary and angry
as we see oppression, suffering, exploitation, and cruelty
in this world that you created and called good.
We pray that you will keep us impatient and active in the face of injustice
and compassionate toward all who suffer.
God of Peace,
remind us of your vision of Shalom for us, for all people, and for all creation.
Use us as instruments of your love
and help us live together in this world as you intend for us to live.
Amen.*

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It doesn't take long to find reasons to get discouraged about things that are happening on our campuses, in our nation, and in our world.

We don't have to look far to find racism, homophobia, transphobia, political rage, hate speech, and prejudice.

Presbyterians know that's true.

Our experience is that, as we study the Bible prayerfully and together, we are addressed from beyond ourselves by a living and faithful God who continues to respond to human sin by pursuing and loving. We believe God continues to call, empower, and inspire us to live with hope in a world where sin and death are real, but where Easter is true.

That's why we go to church.

It's why we continue to study the Bible together and participate in the ongoing story of God's interaction with the world through Christ and his body the church.

It's why we continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper and baptize new church members.

It's why we continue to work for justice and help others who are having a hard time.

Presbyterians believe God isn't finished.

ENGAGING THE BIBLE

1

Consider **Habakkuk 1:1-4** and **2:1-3**.

HABAKKUK 1:1-2

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

**O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?**

**Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?**

Think about incidents of terrorism, mass violence, and unnecessary suffering that you are aware of right now.

Each of us could easily produce a long list like this; off the top of our heads; at pretty much any time.

And when we think about such things together, that list will probably grow.

Sadly, it's not all that hard for us to imagine Habakkuk's state of mind.

HABAKKUK 1:3

**Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?**

**Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.**

Turn on the news, open a newspaper, access social media, or just try to live relatively responsibly with some degree of ambient awareness in the society where you find yourself.

Wrongdoing and trouble, destruction and violence, strife and contention are pretty much unavoidable.

They can't really be ignored.

We don't have to look very far.

HABAKKUK 1:4

**So the law becomes slack,
and justice never prevails.**

**The wicked surround the righteous;
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.**

Corrupt politicians are not held accountable for their actions.

Well, sometimes they are, but often they are not.

Courts make decisions that seem clearly and obviously unjust to many of us.

Governments enact laws that disadvantage and sometimes injure us or the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens.

Governments enact laws that seem to unjustly benefit the most privileged of our society.

It's not hard at all for us to feel Habakkuk's vibe.

Isn't this a great way to begin a Bible study about Presbyterian hopefulness for the future?

Habakkuk is definitely pretty grumpy as his book begins.

He argues back and forth with God for another 14 verses in chapter 1, offering an exhaustive list of the ways his life in his community is far different from what he thinks it should be.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *Under what circumstances might it be valuable or appropriate to complain to God about wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, contention, and injustice?*

2

Then, when we get to chapter 2, a couple of really interesting things happen.

HABAKKUK 2:1

**I will stand at my watchpost,
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.**

After doing all that whining and complaining, and giving voice to legitimate outrage and frustration, Habakkuk essentially says, “Okay God, it’s on! What have you got to say for yourself? I’m ready to have this out.”

Take a moment to appreciate that brashness.

One of the interesting things about this story is that, in the midst of all his outrage and frustration, Habakkuk assumes that he’s absolutely capable of complaining to, and even arguing with, God.

It is a significant feature of this story that, in chapter 2 verse 1, this individual from 2700 or so years ago, who faces many of the same disappointments and social strife that we all face, is presumptuous enough to ask for and expect an answer from God regarding this unacceptable situation.

That’s a remarkable sense of the value and prerogatives of one individual human character.

We don’t know anything else about Habakkuk. He wrote in the years around 600BCE, at a time when the Israelites were beset by threatening neighbors (the Chaldeans) and an incompetent and unethical king (Jehoiakim).

The story makes no claims that he’s special in any way.

As far as we know, he’s not royal, he’s not secretly divine, he’s not magic.

He’s just a grumpy, frustrated guy who has a legitimate bone to pick with God.

And then we get to verse 2:

HABAKKUK 2:2

Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets,

so that a runner may read it.

That means something like “Publish the vision you have from me. Show it to everybody. Put it on a dadgum billboard. Make it so big that somebody rushing by won’t even have to slow down to read it.”

HABAKKUK 2:3

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end and does not lie.

If it seem to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come; it will not delay.

It’s huge that God answers Habakkuk.

One of the distinctive features of the Hebrew Scriptures—what we Christians call the Old Testament—is all of the accounts they include of one-on-one, give-and-take conversations between God and individual humans.

There are conversations like that between God and Adam, Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and others.

Different ones of us probably have different theological opinions about those stories, but they make great literature. They’re great ways to for people like us to enter conversations about how things should be, and why they’re not that way.

It’s interesting to note that, in this story, God *answers* whiny, grumpy Habakkuk.

But, at first glance, God’s answer to Habakkuk is not particularly inspiring.

“Wait for it?”

Is that God’s best answer to Habakkuk? Or to us?

“Yeah, things might suck now, but they’ll get better someday.

Just wait.”

“Wait for things to get better” just doesn’t seem like an adequate response to the violence, trouble, strife, and contention that infect our lives and our world every day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *What frustration do you derive from God's instruction to Habakkuk to "wait for the vision if it seems to tarry"?*
- *What comfort can you derive from that same instruction?*
- *How can you balance that frustration and comfort?*

3

But that's not all God says to Habakkuk.

Before telling Habakkuk that there is a vision for the appointed time and to wait for it if it seems to tarry, God tells him to "write the vision."

Presbyterians believe that we certainly cannot and should not ignore the wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, violence, strife, contention, and injustice in the world.

We believe God calls and enables us to present, proclaim, and embody a different vision of how we can live together in this hurting and sinful world.

Presbyterians believe God continues to work in the world through us, in us, among us, for us, and sometimes in spite of us.

There are many biblical passages that give guidance to Presbyterians as we endeavor to "write the vision."

Presbyterians don't claim to know exhaustively all that God is doing or will do. Our common experience is that sometimes we can only fully recognize God's presence in retrospect. We're better at recognizing God's fingerprints than fully anticipating God's agenda.

Presbyterians believe our loving, gracious God continues to work with us, in us, through us, for us, and sometimes in spite of us, to bring comfort and healing to this vulnerable hurting world and its vulnerable, hurting inhabitants.

4

Consider The "Ten Commandments" passage in **Exodus 20:1-17**.

Most Christians through the centuries have tended to read the Ten Commandments as Ten Prohibitions. There is often a tendency, at least in our minds, to add an "or else" to the end of each commandment.

You shall have no other gods before me, or else . . .

Honor your father and mother, or else . . .

Thou shalt not steal, or else . . .

They might as well be the Ten Threats.

But some scholars (notably Albert Curry Winn in *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, and the Commandments*) argue that it makes much more sense to read Exodus 20:1–17 as a list of Ten Promises.

God makes promises all over the Bible.

Think about the rainbow at the end of the Noah's Ark story (**Genesis 9:8–17**); and God's promise to make Abraham's descendants a great nation (**Genesis 12:1–3**); and Jesus' promises "Lo, I am with you always" (**Matthew 28:20**) and "I will not leave you desolate" (**John 14:18**).

Some of us maintain that reading the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises is much more consistent with the way God behaves in the rest of the Bible than reading them as Ten Prohibitions or Ten Threats.

Think about what was going on among the Israelites when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

God had delivered them from the terrible situation of being mistreated slaves in Egypt. It had to have been exciting to have followed Moses and God and gotten out from under the oppression of the Egyptians.

But it was probably a little scary too.

"We followed Moses and God helped him do some amazing things. I mean, it was pretty hard to ignore that Red Sea parting business. But now here we are out in the middle of nowhere. We're not slaves any more, but we don't have much to eat and who knows what's gonna happen next."

Go back and look at the chapters of Exodus that come right before the Ten Commandments. The people of Israel were getting pretty whiny.

It makes some sense to think that the gracious, merciful, patient, and abundantly loving God of the Hebrew Scriptures probably wouldn't have given the Israelites a list of prohibitions or threats at that point.

It's not as though the Ten Commandments were a recipe for earning God's favor. The Israelites already had God's favor.

The Commandments weren't requirements for being delivered from bondage. Israel had already been delivered from bondage.

Maybe the Ten Commandments are more like God saying to that scared and whiny bunch of people, "Chill out—here's ten things that are gonna be true about y'all by the time I'm finished with you. Here are ten promises from me to all of you."

EXODUS 20:1-3

Then God spoke these words,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has a clear understanding of what really matters; where nobody acts like there is nothing more important than money, or nations, or economic systems, or denominations, or "people like us."

That's where God has promised to lead us.

EXODUS 20:4-6

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody knows who God is and where God is. That's a world where everybody takes the right stuff seriously and everybody is more concerned with helping people who need help than with worrying about who sleeps with whom or whether they got dunked or sprinkled.

EXODUS 20:7

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses [God's] name.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody who talks the talk will walk the walk. That's a world where nobody claims to serve God and then abuses or takes advantage of other people.

EXODUS 20:8-11

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male and female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where nobody ever works so hard it makes them sick.

That’s a world where “busyness” never gets in the way of loving God and neighbor.

We seek to be diligent about caring for ourselves, for those we depend on, for those who depend on us, for all our neighbors, and for all creation.

EXODUS 20:12

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD is giving you.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has appropriate gratitude and respect for the people who came before them; and responsible and gracious concern for everybody who will come after them. That’s a world where we try to act with less selfishness and more concern for everybody else—past, present, and future.

EXODUS 20:13

“You shall not murder.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where the people of God are champions of life in all its forms. That’s a world where it is no longer necessary to kill, either in self-defense, or in war, or through capital punishment.

We imagine a world where those are just academic issues that are never relevant to real life.

EXODUS 20:14

“You shall not commit adultery.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody is faithful, where everybody can be counted on, all the time. That’s a world where nobody makes promises they don’t keep.

EXODUS 20:15

“You shall not steal.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody is gracious and generous. That’s a world where all people recognize that they are gifted children of God. It’s a world where everybody has what they need and respects the needs of others.

EXODUS 20:16

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody has the courage to tell the truth and to hear the truth—even when it’s inconvenient or uncomfortable. That’s a world where it never occurs to anybody to doubt the word of someone else.

EXODUS 20:17

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Presbyterians imagine and work toward a world where everybody pays more attention to what they have than what they don’t have. It’s a world where we think more about giving and sharing than acquiring and protecting.

5

It makes a lot of sense to think about the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises—ten descriptions of the future to which God is leading us.

The Ten Commandments are not Ten Prerequisites for becoming beloved children of God. The Israelites to whom the commandments were originally given were already God’s beloved children; and so are we.

These verses are much better understood as a list of ten promises from God about what it means to be beloved children of God; and as guidelines for us as we try to live like the beloved children of God that we know we are.

Like Habakkuk, we all woke up today in a world full of violence, wrongdoing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, and injustice.

But Presbyterians believe that our Bible tells us that, while that's true, it's not the whole story.

When we read the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises, we see a clear vision of the life together to which God is leading us.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *What new insights do you gain from thinking about the Ten Commandments as Ten Promises as opposed to Ten Threats?*

6

In addition to the Ten Commandments, there are other passages throughout Scripture that provide categories and vocabulary for Presbyterians as we seek to “write the vision” of the life together to which God is leading us all.

ISAIAH 11:6–9

**The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the
knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.**

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can these images inform our efforts as Presbyterians to live faithfully and hopefully in the real world?*

JEREMIAH 31:33-34

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How might the promise in Jeremiah 31 be a source of comfort for individuals or faith communities?*

REVELATION 21:3-6

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

**“See, the home of God is among mortals.
[God] will dwell with them;
they will be [God’s] peoples,
And God . . . will be with them and be their God;
[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”**

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

- *How might these words from Revelation 21 be a source of comfort for individuals or faith communities?*

Presbyterians believe God isn’t finished.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- *How can your UKirk ministry “write the vision” in your particular context?*

BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESBYTERIAN BIBLE STUDY

- *What best practice for Presbyterian Bible Study can you articulate from Presbyterian recognition that God isn’t finished?*
 - *How can the promises, insights, and images discussed above inform the way Presbyterians study the Bible?*
-