

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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In medias res

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Living by faith often feels like a bewildering adventure. Our faith story begins with God blessing past generations, who bequeath these blessings to us.

Our faith asks us to live up to a standard of moral conduct so that all people may flourish – see the image of God in the other, the immigrant, the stranger.

Our faith expects us to give a portion of our resources to the common good – to strengthen the congregation and ministry.

Our faith teaches us to refrain from antagonism or threats or lies, behaviors that compromise a community or person's security.

Our faith teaches all this and yet it feels as though the wicked are winning.

As God's chosen, why don't we get preferential treatment? Is it unreasonable to expect we will be exempt from dead ends. From being looked down upon. From needing to clean up the messes made by others.

Well, if you've ever felt such frustrations, know that the prophet Habakkuk voiced the same.

His words are gathered among the twelve minor prophets, such as Micah and Jonah and Amos. The label "minor" does not diminish the weight of his or any of the prophets' words. Their

prophecies tend to be much shorter in length, which sharpens the force of their message.

Habakkuk's three chapters stand apart in other ways. Usually, a prophet speaks on behalf of God – as the mouthpiece of God, they call out our behavior, push us to change. Most prophets are in-your-face with stinging rebukes.

Habakkuk turns and instead speaks to God on our behalf. Across the centuries, his words still hold merit as he quarrels with God from our attempts to make sense of things. He insists that God pay attention to us.

Before I read portions of his words, please pray with me,

Dear God, we come before your holy word with questions. How do we make sense of the world today and our place in it? How do we navigate forward, as individuals and as your son's church? Silence the noise around us and breath fresh meaning for us into these words that we may be startled with your truth. Amen.

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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?

Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and

justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous -- therefore judgment comes forth perverted....

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.

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



If Homer or Virgil sat down to watch *The Sound of Music*, they might take issue with a certain singing nun. Maria teaches singing with, “let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start,” while those ancient authors knew that starting at the beginning is rarely possible and never a good place to begin any story.

If *Star Wars* began with the life story of Darth Vader, and not with the Death Star plans stolen, there would be no space for an ‘I am your father’ type revelation.

Great story tellers know to begin *in medias res*, the Latin phrase for “in the midst of.” You don’t start at the beginning; you start at a place that forces us to wonder what’s going on.

When we are thrown in the middle of action, it demands that we form our own conclusions about characters. *In medias res* disorients us. It causes us to take a hard look to get our bearings. It launches us into the action and creates immediate urgency.¹

Stories told *in medias res* are not only more captivating, they feed off our instinctive knowledge that we might start our lives with a defined birthdate, but we live in the reality of being thrown into a world that started long before us, that impose hardships or unmerited advantage and will continue long after us.

¹ Edward Willis, “*In medias res* - what it is and why you should use it,” *Writing Tips*, last updated May 28, 2021, <https://thehistoryquill.com/in-medias-res-what-it-is-and-why-you-should-use-it/>

Think of how your family's wealth or poverty shaped your life, even though you had nothing to do with it. Or the way a sibling or parent's illness molded your daily routine.

How does the color of your skin open up or close off opportunities in your community because of historic prejudices?

Those enraged by climate change appeal to our sense of moral obligation to future generations. Only if we change our ways can we prevent untenable weather decades to come on those who will have no recourse.

Can you think of any aspects of your life when you began something with a fresh slate? Not likely.

Even a new school year doesn't reset the clock. What you learned or not in prior years impacts your abilities along with the lingering impact of hybrid from COVID.

In medias res also challenges us to discern someone else's character. Just like Darth Vader, how often are we surprised by another's history? In this same vein, do we recognize how we show up to others in new situations?

In the midst of. We are thrown into the midst of politics. Tax schemes. Budget deficits. Neighborhood associations. Family dramas. Workplace dynamics.

Writer and speaker, Simon Sinek expands upon *in medias res*.

His book, *The Infinite Game*, distinguishes between infinite and finite games.

A finite game has a prescribed number of players, well-articulated rules, and specific objectives. Any sports competition serves as an example. It seems to me that NCAA Basketball championships end with victory going to the team that scored just before the buzzer.

Infinite games include a variety of players, each with their own objectives, who enter and leave the game. As implied, an infinite game commences without an anticipated conclusion.

When players leave a finite game, the game ends. When players leave an infinite game, the game goes on without them.

Sinek observes that when organizations operate as if engaged in a finite game, focuses on quarterly earnings reports and annual goals, naming winners and losers in the marketplace, their thinking forecloses on possibilities. So focused on winning, they don't play as well.

With an infinite mindset, organizations are more likely thrive – not getting bogged down by chasing small wins or overreact to threats. They keep their eye on a distant vision.

Infinite minded people and organizations look around with an eye towards expanding their horizon. Finite organizations jockey for short term measures.

Those who live life as a finite game, seeking to win at all costs, eventually get caught up in their own disappointment. A finite game works for sports, or poker, or cooking contests, and that's about it.²

Human life is an infinite game, and those who live a life of faith, see it as an infinite game. We cannot choose the arena or difficulties in which we live. We cannot choose the other players. For people of faith, when we get thrown into a mess and are expected to play by rules – the commandments given long ago – it appears as though faith will burden more than help us.

Habakkuk's prophecy speaks to this. He cries to God, "why is there such general lawlessness? God, it appears as though this world you gave us doesn't care about your moral teachings."

Habakkuk can only ask these questions because he has a trusting relationship with God. An intimacy. He demands an answer, and places himself high on a rampart, keeping himself in plain view, to watch and wait for God.

Based upon this story, God approves of his strategy, because God answers. Habakkuk hears, "write the vision, make it plain." In other words, "I have a vision for your future. Don't get mired in obtuse thinking or petty details."

²Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).

To stress that point, God wants it written so that anyone can read it while running or who reads it will be inspired to run with it. The Hebrew's flexibility conveys both, making it all the more clear.

And then God says, "be patient." You will get your vision when I am ready. Maybe, God means when you are ready. In God's infinite time frame, patience doesn't cost anything. Only those who flout the laws, driven from greed or fear, work on deadlines.

The righteous live by faith, they have all the time...literally. When the righteous become patient, waiting on God, they confound the wicked who actively seek to close ground or score the goal.

In this faithful patience, Habakkuk teaches us that we can become people who are not afraid of conflict. We can get comfortable with promise and comfortable with another's short-term or small-minded thinking that seeks to provoke conflict. When conflict arrives, those who hold to faith know the gospel give us both the permission and the commandment to be in difficulty with hope.³

Habakkuk places hope as a foundation to faith. Hope never denies the conflict of today, but seeks God's direction, God's vision, and patiently holds on to faith. This hope that he heard, God fulfilled, and for us fulfilled in the gift of Jesus.

³ Donna Schaper, Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, *Feasting on the Word*, Ed David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 245.

When conflict arose again for those who followed Jesus, gathered to be his body in struggling churches, this ancient prophet's words inspired the writings of Paul and the early church.

Paul relies upon Habakkuk when writing to the churches in Rome (1:17) and Galatia (3:11). As if to say, "wait and persevere through the conflict, together, as God's vision unfolds for the righteous."

In the 16th century, these words of hope inspired members of the church to reform its ways. Rather than be subject to the interpretation of priests or presume someone else had more direct access to speak to or hear from God, courageous men and women created new way to seek intimacy with God.

Their willingness to enter the conflict with the Roman church led the way to end the scorekeeping with buying indulgences and requirements to earn your salvation, as if God plays a finite game. They saw a vision to level the playing ground, for all to have direct access to God. For all to become the body of the church. For all to share the responsibility to govern. To serve. For all to read and interpret scripture.

One of the pillars of the Reformation, John Calvin reflects on Habakkuk, "We are taught that we are not to deal with God in too limited a manner, but room must be given for hope; for the Lord does not immediately execute what the Lord declares by

mouth; but God's purpose is to prove patience, and the obedience of our faith."⁴

Habakkuk reminds us that God does not let evil have the final word. The final word belongs to God, who revealed God's own self as the ultimate gift that finally come to the earth. If living with the faith that such a revelation would come was a source of strength once upon a time for the people of God, we now know that God's gift faith is not just a source of encouragement or hope: it really is life itself.

It may feel as though our story begins *in medias res*, in the middle of everything. It does. Even when we find this life of faith disorienting, we can look back and find the solid foundation of people who gathered around the word, who asked God directly, "what's next" and picked up the task to be the righteous.

Thanks be to God for those with patience and a willingness to endure conflict – centuries ago, and even decades ago at Westminster. Now it is our turn to directly ask God for guidance. Everyone. Not just a few, but everyone. We live this faith, the hope for future generations.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Habakkuk 2:2,3*,
<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/habakkuk/2.htm>



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