

A VISION FOR THE APPOINTED TIME

Habakkuk is as ancient as 600 BCE and as contemporary as today. He is a righteous man, a prophet who is watching his world crumble around him. He is angry and bewildered why God seems to let the evil trample all over good folks. Those who labor tirelessly and yearn for justice and peace seem hopelessly overwhelmed and deserted. In the opening page of the little book of Habakkuk, God is sharing that the world-conquering Babylonians are going to rise suddenly and overcome Judah. Habakkuk finds this incredulous. The Message paraphrase of Habakkuk 1:12 & 13, captures his incredulity:

God, you chose *Babylonians* for your judgment work?
Rock-Solid God, you gave *them* the job of discipline?
But you can't be serious!
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*!

And we have similar dismay as we watch injustice, violence and deviousness parade across our daily news.

So the prophet decides that he and God are going to have a heart to heart talk. He climbs up into the watch tower on the city wall to wait for God to answer him. And sure enough, God comes. And the conversation unfolds. God tells him there is a vision that will seem slow to come, but will be surely fulfilled in its appointed time. The eternal truth is that

He whose soul is not upright in him shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by his faith. vs 4

Or as the Message translates this

Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—
full of himself but soul-empty,
But the person in right standing before God
through loyal and steady believing is fully alive, *really* alive. vs 4.

God goes on to show Habakkuk the way the world really works.

Those who arrogantly take financial advantage of people end up plundered and destroyed.

Those who build their destinies and dynasties through evil will find themselves condemned and accused by the very edifices they built.

Those who build towns and nations through violence will come to nothingness and ashes.

Those who party themselves into degradation will find themselves covered in shame.

Those who create gods of their choice and worship them will find them truly empty.

In March 2009, the truth of this is being played out before our very eyes! We see the untouchable titans of the financial markets crumbled within hours. Those who have prospered through greed and violences are having to beg hat-in-hand to survive. Folks who have gloried in unchecked life styles of degradation find themselves empty and scared. And all the false gods of our own making are silent and impotent. But like the prophet of old, our lives don't stand immune to the consequences of others' sins and consequences. The sins of my country spill out into yours. The sins of worshipping the "market" as an all-wise god is shaking all of our lives—good folks and bad folks alike. The sins of relating to the world with arrogance, divisiveness and violence has deeply scarred every nation on earth.

YET, in the midst of the dire reality—for both Habakkuk and us—there is this amazing verse 14.
Meanwhile the earth fills up
with awareness of God's glory
as the waters cover the sea.

Amazing! Not *after* we have escaped hard time. Not after evil has run its course. But in the meantime—in the midst of the troubles—the earth fills up with the awareness of God's heart of love and transforming empowerment. And herein lies the vision for our time.

The picture I see is of masses of people rising from their delusions, divisions, distractions and forming a mighty people of faith that covers the earth like water covers the ocean beds. We stop trying to define one another by our theologies or our race or culture or our politics. We stop being cowed and silenced by the depth of darkness and pain around us. We put an end to crumbling the world in smaller and smaller pieces—and take seriously our Divine Mandate to live out the ministry of reconciliation. (II Corinthians 5:18)

We stand up and start to make movement together. We begin to walk together because what we have in common is that we trust God, the Holy Divine with our lives and destinies. We walk in fellowship because yearn for the same healing, reconciliation and liberation that the Jesus of Galilee dreamed for us. We walk, act, speak in the same spirit as the Holy One whose name and character is Love. We give the gifts that are ours to give. We rejoice and trust the gifts that are others to give. We let ourselves dance the dance of respect and interdependence. We don't let ourselves be picked off like straggling prey through our differences and preferences. In breaking through our separateness, we let ourselves be formed and shaped by the Pentecost miracle that creates understanding in spite of diversity. We lay down our own violent arms of rightness and self-righteous religiosity. We let ourselves stand vulnerable and quiet before the God who loves us and those strangers who are now accompanying us. And we take up the heart of God in all that we are and do—and live it out sturdily in the midst of these fragile times. The world is broken. Now is the time for us to be who we were always meant to be.

The vision for this appointed time is a call to lift our gaze from our small lives and join of the awareness of God's glory that wishes to move over this broken planet with love, mercy and grace. It is a time to expand beyond our like-minded groups and make common cause with everyone who is being drawn into the vision of God's love. It is time to be sturdy and move beyond our little individual kingdoms of wants and needs and familiar comforts. It is time to transcend our pains and woundedness. It is time to confront our fears and get on with it. It is time to stop hiding behind our well crafted sense of rightness and fall on our faces before the Creator and let ourselves become rearranged in patterns of love and transformative reconciliation. Now is the time. Actually there is no time to waste.

I am so pleased to get to be speaking here at the Annual Meeting of the FWCC Section of the Americas because it seems to me that you stand in the middle of this vision. I am deeply grateful to each of you for years of consistent faithfulness. You have entered into the fractured world of Friends and made space for folks of every Quaker flavor to meet face to face and heart to heart. You have built bridges and laid rail so that Friends worldwide could connect the adventure of deep listening and respect.

But I am aware that the world is shifting under our feet. The ways you have carried out your mission in the past may not be the ways that are going to unfold in the future. The pinch of finances is painful and bewildering. It is a moment for clarity to sense what God is doing and find the new ways the join it.

1. The vision suggests a renewed commitment to personal responsibility.

Ephesians 4:30-5:1 (again from the Message version of the Bible) reads:

Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.

Make a clean break with all the cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. (or continues to forgive you)

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. **Mostly what God does is love you.** Keep company with him and learn a live of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant.

He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

We Quakers are pretty good at extending love to the world "out there." But we have done a pretty poor job of extending that same love within the family of Friends. There is often harshness and strife among us. The seeds of separation--that keep us from moving rhythmically and gracefully together--rise from each of our hearts. They are reflected in our careless words and our unexamined non-verbal expressions. A raised eyebrow can kill the reputation of a brother or sister as surely as a torrent of words. The intonation of the simple word "them" can make a canyon that is hard to bridge. Our fears erect defenses that lure us

into division. They whittle down the possibilities. They short circuit the work God wants to do among us. Fear moves us into behaviors and decisions we would never make if we were to abide in Love. As I have read the writings that have formed the basis for splits of Friends here in the United States, I have been struck over and over again how it reads, “we are afraid that. . . .” Truth is the harm actually never materialized. But the division among Friends proceeded because we were afraid of what might unfold. We are called to love—everyone, all the time, no matter what the consequences. This is the way of Christ. This is the heart of the Religious Society of Friends. Love casts out fear. And that fear-dispersing love starts with a commitment by everyone in this room.

If we are going to be Life-Giving, transforming people in a fragile world that is crumbling around us, we really must stop playing at our faith-- and love as if our lives depend upon it. Which actually they actually. To do this we need each other. We all have blind spots. We all have pain to heal. We all have real struggles with what love means in the context of our own understandings and theologies.

But we also have immense power in the simple acts and words of love to make a difference. I remember a time when I was criticizing another woman in the church. I was just chatting conversationally and remarked about what I thought were her limitations. Rather than join me in the criticism, my friend looked at me kindly and said something to the effect: “This surprises me. I find her to be kind, helpful and wise.” It startled me; and that little response changed me. I began to see the woman through those new words—kind, helpful and wise. And sure enough my friend was right. What could have been a rift in the Meeting shifted—and a new friendship budded and bloomed. Simple words changed the course of my life—and the history of that church. Criticism, judgment, fear swirl through our lives all the time. It is a lovely thing to become aware of the ways each of us can intercept those with simple words and compassionate expressions that make space for love and understanding. We can often help one another move past the surface difficulties and find the pure gold that lies in all of us. I so agree with William Penn who said, “Love is the hardest lesson in Christianity; but, for that reason, it should be most our care to learn it.”

2. From the commitment to love rises the desire to be part of healing and reconciliation. Many of you know David Niyonzima. He was a victim of the genocidal violence in Burundi. As he made his personal journey from terror to forgiveness to reconciliation, he became convinced that the genocide of 1993 rose because there had never been healing from the violences in previous decades. He set about to heal the roots of violence through Trauma Healing and Reconciliation. (THARS) Without healing, violence—large and small, overt and subtle—recurs.

For the most part, Friends of the Americas live with different pain than Burundi—but we are still diminished by the wounds that have never healed. When I think about the healing process, I know if a wound is healed when there is no lingering pain and I am not defensive in protection of it. I know it is healed when there is a restoration of its function. I may have a scar, but has become simply a fact of a past event—not a present and controlling pain. We, Friends, have moved on past our pains and divisions—but I know that we have not always truly healed the

rifts among us. I see the effects of past pain lived out daily in ways that damage our witness and hold us back from being what we were meant to be. We are never free as long as we need to define ourselves in opposition to another, to the “other.”

I believe that God is calling Friends in general and FWCC in specific to step into seeking God’s wisdom about where situations are ripe for healing.

I am wondering if one of the next steps for FWCC is to Listen together around missions of healing? Might we find ourselves called to be more intentional in the ministry of reconciliation and healing? Are there situations that are ripe for healing and FWCC is perfectly positioned to be the faithful agent of those next steps?

I could see FWCC encouraging and liberating dozens of regional initiatives for reconciliation. I am so aware of how powerful it has been for women of North Pacific Yearly Meeting and Northwest Yearly Meeting to start meeting together, worshipping together, giving and receiving of ourselves to one another. Sometimes these opportunities happen because one of you simply invites and begins the conversation. Sometimes Meetings cultivate times of sharing and working together in the community. Sometimes we do the hard work of going to a perceived “enemy” with a tender heart and open ourselves to whatever Spirit might do.

Just as we understand the wonderful practice of prayerfully holding the space for Meeting for Worship, I believe it would be deeply helpful if someone holds the space for healing. I am wondering if that Spirit presence among Friends is FWCC. I could envision FWCC being a grace-filled hub of resources of ideas that have borne the fruit of healing. I could see even the slim budget shifting from programs and staff to having ample grant funding to liberate healing projects as they arise in faithfulness.

If we were to find a way to live out healing and restoration of relationships among Friends, we would be a mighty witness to the world. Our organizations would probably remain diverse and institutionally separate, but if the toxicity of our spirits were cleansed, we could dance the dance of love and mutuality. If we knew experientially the miracle of restoration and transformation, we could move with increased authenticity as peacemakers in the world. If we linked arms and sang the song of re-creation among us—God’s heart would be enlarged over the earth.

The times are as dark as the days of Habakkuk. But the vision for our appointed time is as thrilling and as possible as ever. For truly—in the midst of travail, it is God’s nature to call us into a wonderful ocean of love and light that actually does wash over the ocean of darkness and despair.

And in the midst of pain and darkness, the earth is filled up with the awareness of God’s redemptive love and glory.

I want to be a part of that. I suspect we all want to be.