

Holy Gifts, Wholly Giving.. Island-Style

Habakkuk 1:1-11

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“I can hear you, but I can’t see you,” so said my youngest son on iPhone FaceTime. From Decatur to Damascus: The Senate bill is ready. The gunship cannons are on red alert. I’m not ready, are you? All the women, the children, the families: will they be ready? How can anyone be ready for their death, destruction, dismemberment? We hear about degrading Assad’s ability to use chemical weapons. What about our souls being further degraded, diminished, demolished? When fire rains down from the heavens, can we still march in the light of God?

“I can hear you, but I can’t see you.” Habakkuk needs an “ardent embrace,” a great big hug. There’s no hugging in this chapter nor in any of the four. I like Habakkuk. It’s an honest, open-ended conversation with the Almighty, the Creator of this broken and hurting world, with broken and hurting people.

What we need is FaceTime with God: Hand-to-hand combat as Jacob did wrestling the angel, as Hannah did in pouring out her tears in the Temple, as Mary’s Magnificat does, as presidents do when fundraising needs to happen, as faculty do when tenure or promotion reviews come, as staff do when deadlines approach, as students do when there’s that paper, that verbatim, that dang ordination exam to prepare.

We need an ardent embrace. We’re all Habakkuks: we need to embrace God: God’s heart, God’s mind. Even more, we need God to embrace us, to embrace this world: Babylon to Judah, Damascus to Decatur. “Look at the nations, and see! Be astonished! Be astounded!” Habakkuk cries out to God “Wake up, God. Embrace it, God. Embrace us.

Seattle pastor and blogger Eugene Cho tweeted on August 30: “The best way to become a better storyteller is to simply live a better life. Not a perfect life, but one of honesty, integrity, and passion.” These are gifts of God, graces of God: an anchoring in the heart and mind of God, a delighting in God, as Jesus does with the Father.

Honesty, integrity, and passion; Habakkuk’s mind, heart, soul. This is changing his whole being, his whole perception, his reception of the world outside and inside. Honesty, integrity, passion: this is being encoded and emblazoned on his life and with yours. You are being apprenticed in the ways of Jesus Christ. You can hear the prayer, as your heart is apprenticed, being shaped and formed into God’s own. “I need FaceTime with God,” Habakkuk cries out for honesty, integrity, and passion from God. It’s as if he cries out, “God, I need you to be honest. God, I need you to have integrity; God, I need you to be passionate because we are suffering.” Habakkuk’s cry is honest, passionate prayer with integrity, a no-holds barred, real relationship with God.

That’s what your ministry in this place is: a lifelong apprenticeship in prayer, being anchored to the heart and mind of God, to ardently embrace what God ardently

embraces, to ardently embrace whom God ardently embraces, God's Son, God's Anointed One to whom holy gifts have been wholly given. To embrace the Anointed One, to be embraced by the Anointed One through Christ, with Christ, in Christ is to embrace the world in Him.

From Decatur to Damascus, we cry, "I can hear you, but I can't see you." In the worlds of theology, history, preaching and worship, pastoral care, leadership, biblical studies, ethics, feminist studies, post-colonial studies, ecumenical theology, world Christianity, missional theology, we sometimes feel or say, "I can hear you, but I can't see you." Or sometimes we can feel that as inquirers, candidates for ordination, or being certified ready to receive a call. Think of your MIFs (ministry information forms). Don't get miffed if your call becomes a part-time one or if your call involves two or three yoked congregations. "I can hear you, but I can't see you." What if that call doesn't come? Or what if your call takes you to a distant land, with dirt roads, with spotty or no WiFi coverage? "Oh no!" you might be tempted to think. "I can hear, but I can't see you." You are being apprenticed to a lifetime of prayer, of communing with the heart of God as God communes with you.

I am Filipino American born on the Pacific island of Guam. You can drive around the whole island in two hours. On a little island you can only do three things: eat, party, and swim. As with any island party, you invite your next door neighbor. You don't use Evite; just a word to come on over will do. Tell one neighbor and that neighbor will tell other neighbors. The expectation is that everyone will bring the whole household, the whole clan. Eventually blocks of people come, not necessarily for a birthday or an anniversary, but just to come. You eat, you sing karaoke, you dance, you talk about other people. Some call it gossip; in Christian circles, we call it sharing prayer concerns!

You eat, you party, and you swim into the early morning. Then you go home. But before you do, you get aluminum foil and you pack food, a lot of food. You go home and you tell people about the wonderful party, of what you have seen and heard.

In the islands, we make a distinction between eating, dining, and feasting. Eating is the function of putting food in your mouth. Dining is eating, but with rules, protocols, etiquette, forks, knives. Feasting, which is what we do on the island, is using your fingers and your hands. It's bringing your family, it's bringing the joys and strains of life to the table.

It's about honesty, integrity, passion — apprenticeship in lifelong prayer in honesty, integrity, and passion. It's about feasting: giving your whole self to God, crying out to God, "I can hear you, but I don't see you," even as God gives God's whole self to you.

It's a mutual feasting: God and you and us, in mutual feasting, opening our lives to each other, fully, honestly, passionately.

Open your life to the world in love. At this Table, this feast Table, where we bring ourselves, where we bring the prayers for the world, where we offer the prayers of the world: "I can hear you, but I can't see you." But then, the apprenticeship was nearly complete, for the Gospel says, "When he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them, then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." Come, and hear! Come, and taste! Come, and see! Come, and feast!