

God Is Still Speaking ... About Christian Values
ALL SAINT'S DAY SERMON, November 7, 2004
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HOLY AGITATION, SAINTLY CONTENDING

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

When you think of a saint, what do you think of? Perhaps you think of someone with a halo, maybe sitting demurely or someone who is quiet and peaceful?

In the Protestant tradition, saints have no exalted status. Saints are everyday people who live out their faith in extraordinary ways. If we take a look at the saints of the United Church of Christ, we will see that they are a lot like the prophet Habakkuk, what I would like to call Holy Agitators and Saintly Contenders.

They were people who saw the injustices of their day and were anything but quiet and demure. They brought their outrage and their disillusionment before God. They were bold enough to cry out at the top of their lungs and raise the hard questions – the ones no one else wanted to ask.

Sometimes that is what it means to have faith. To let ourselves feel what we feel, to bring it before God, and to let our outrage be transformed into energy and passion that refuses to let up when the going gets tough.

Every one of our UCC “firsts” started with some group of people taking their faith seriously and beginning to hear and then articulate God’s broad vision for justice, peace and inclusion in the face of what seemed like overwhelming odds: in the face of what might have seemed to be God’s silence on the matter.

No doubt many of us do feel a myriad of emotions this week. My guess is that many of Habakkuk’s words may ring a note of truth in our own souls:

How long, O God, shall we cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry out Violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me and strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice does not prevail.

Habakkuk was a prophet of Israel, a small insignificant nation which did not have a whole lot of clout on the world scene. It was a nation being overrun by the Chaldeans: a world superpower on the march.

Perhaps we can identify with Habakkuk, in the sense that we may feel our voice is small and insignificant and that our cries for justice and peace for the world’s most vulnerable, are being trampled by a nation on the march to a very different beat.

What does Habakkuk do in the face of what seems like defeat? He stands at his watch post and stations himself on the lookout tower. He trusts that God is hearing his questions and his complaints. He steadies himself to keep watch and to see what God will say to him, how God will answer.

He knows that the seeming silence of God is not the last word. God answers is still speaking:

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. It seems to tarry, but 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 will live by their faith.

Righteousness, just like holiness and sainthood is a term that has been co-opted in ways that I do not believe God ever intended.

To live by faith, according the biblical witness is to be a Holy Agitator and a Sainly Contender: one who strives for God's vision of right and just relationships.

We, like the prophets of the bible and like our UCC forbearers, find ourselves at a time when our questions and our outrage may be the only prayer we know how to pray.

If that is so, then we follow in the footsteps and join a long line of holy agitators and saintly contenders who were free enough to face off with what felt like God's silence, who stood at their watch posts with their eyes peeled for God's justice, who allowed their outrage and questions to lead to a bold articulation of God's vision for the vulnerable and the weak of our world.

It seems to me that there is no better time for our denomination to be writing down our vision of God's extravagant welcome, of inclusion, of justice for the weak and the vulnerable and finding ways *to make it plain, to make it clear* so that people can see it. To make it plain and clear so that people know there is another way of being a moral church goer !

Habakkuk's vision was birthed because of his willingness to bring his outrage and to raise his questions to God and to trust that there would be an answer.

Today is a good day to remember that we follow in a long line of Holy Agitators and Sainly Contenders who stood at their watch posts and waited and watched and listened in the silence, in the face of superpowers of every kind, in the face of overwhelming odds and exit poll data.

They allowed their disillusionment, their fears, their grief to be transformed into faithful words and faithful actions. They allowed the obstacles to become a catalyst.

Never place a period where God has places a comma. God is still speaking. That is the vision of the UCC and we have written it on today's version of moving stone tablets! Two UCC commercials are about to air on national television in three short weeks.

More than ever, our world needs churchgoers, like you and I
--who grasp what it means to live as holy agitators and saintly contenders
--who redefine what it means to be faithful and moral Christians
-- who will refuse to picture God as one who slams the book closed and says – that's it, there is nothing left to say!

People who are committed to being church members who see the vision and
RUN WITH IT! Amen