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Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
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Angry at God

I've always been a kid that wanders through the forest. Taking pictures of small flowers and listening to the roar of waterfalls. God's creation is a church to me and its frogs and dragonflies are fellow worshipers with me. So I have a soft heart for all things green. No surprise that in High school I spent May terms canoeing and going on a science trip to eastern Kentucky to study coal mining.

That month I learned that once I saw the scars of the world, I could never close my eyes again.

Or at least that is how I felt when I saw my first open-topped coal mine in Kentucky back in High School. Seeing a lush forest reduced to an open dusty pit. Scandalously perfect ramps cut into the ground, spiraling downward, further and further to impossible depth. The worst part was that I knew that back in that time 90% of my electricity came from coal mines such as this. I willing or not was complicit in this ugly scar. I felt a mixture of guilt and disgust for something I depended on.

And I have a feeling that some of you have gone through similar awakenings. Have there been times in your life when you realize that the world is not as perfect as we thought as children? Maybe you got invested in Jessie Morrow Mountain or Oak Flat, learning about how mining threatened a sacred space for the people who have stewarded it long before Mennonites were a thing. Maybe your ancestors were slave owners and you've taken it upon yourself to be a good ancestor by learning about and resisting white supremacy. Maybe being a farmer has opened your eyes to the hard work of raising fruit or praying for water at the correct times.

And it turns out that the world is so much more complex and scary than we think it is. At these times of distress I cry out to God, why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? It's really not fair on two levels. It's not fair that the world is the way that it is and it's not fair that I have been awakened from my blissful ignorance. Habakkuk is crying out from the whirlwind of distress. The Hebrew root for Habakkuk is "the embrace" or "clasp," which theologian Huge Page thought more of a title to the book than an author's name. Meaning the prophet was seised by their emotions. This book is situated right before the exile when the Babylonians were marching on Jerusalem and the Prophet is calling for God to save them. Why did God rescue the Israelites from Egypt only to let them fall prey to Babylon?

This is the so-called dark night of the soul when old perceptions of who God is, who we are, and our place in life breaks down in the face of a crisis. These dark nights of the soul could go many ways. Today, people may “quote” lose their faith in the face of an uncaring cosmos. But the prophet clings on tighter, saying. God send me a vision, I’ll be waiting to see what God has to say about the darkness in this world.

God responds with woe to the proud and wealthy, against the Babylonians that have built their empire by plundering the nations, built Babylon from bloodshed. This vision is that old wisdom from proverbs and psalms, that the wicked will get what is coming to them. That those that live by the sword will die by the sword. And brothers and sisters, I’m not sure what to do with this vision. I’ve only lived three decades, which depending on your political persuasion are full of losing rights, pointless wars, and stagnating wages or the decline of this country. I don’t have the heart to say, oh, everything will be alright.

But what I do know is that despair never did anything for anyone. Yes, see the scars of the world, and cry out to God for the violence and injustice in this world. But this text proclaims standing at the watch post to see where God is moving in this world. Do the work that God appoints to you by the moving of your conscience. This text reminds me of that eternal work, that Habakkuk faced the end of their world at the hands of the Babylonians, but decided to not give up, that even if the world would fall apart, Habakkuk would find how to rejoice in God who makes his feet like the deer and makes him tread upon the heights.

I’ll leave you with the words of Rabbi Tarfon, “you are not required to finish your work, yet neither are you permitted to desist from it.”