



**“Spelling Out the Vision”**

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Hab. 1:1-4; 2:1-3 (NRSV)***

Last month, financial analysts across the nation proclaimed that the recession was over. Did you hear that news? Did you believe it?

I suspect that if you did, you were much more likely to believe that the recession was over if you have retirement investments and own your home, than if you are under water on your mortgage, or lost your job or your home, or both, as a result of the recession.

Even the most optimistic financial analysts agree that we are on a long road to economic recovery in our nation and global village. Most describe the times that we live in as “the jobless recovery,” and project that the housing market—particularly in California—will take several more years to recover.

Meanwhile, the majority of the world’s nations have never known the prosperity that we have enjoyed in the U.S., and most never will.

The sharp contrasts between things as they are and things as God envisions them are troubling for those of us who live with the existential realities of the worst economic crisis in our nation’s history since the Great Depression, and who long for the fulfillment of the prophet’s vision where everyone’s basic needs are met, in the U.S and around the world.

The stress that we experience in these times, or the empathy we feel for others who are struggling, are similar to the challenging times and the spiritual angst that Habakkuk described in today’s Old Testament reading.

II

Scholars do not claim to know with certainty the origins of this Old Testament prophet or his writings, but many surmise (based on his literary themes) that Habakkuk lived during the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and prophesied in Judah (the Southern Kingdom) in the generation just prior to the fall of his homeland.

No matter how grim things may seem today in our nation, the circumstances in the prophet's time were far grimmer than the challenges that we face in our lifetime.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians over 100 years earlier. The Babylonians were now devouring the nations throughout the Ancient Near East, and were threatening the sovereignty and wellbeing of Judah.

The prophet Habakkuk was a man who envisioned a better world, but he was deeply imbedded in the struggle of the poorest of the poor; so he protested mightily about the incongruence between things as they were and things as they should be.

On the bottom of page two in today's bulletins, we read Habakkuk's protest speech, and get a sense of his colorful and dynamic language.

Here Habakkuk is walking a picket line in front of God's house, protesting the suffering of Judah saying:

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. (Hab. 1:1-4)

The prophet goes on to say (and I'm paraphrasing now):

I can't believe how ticked off I am at you, God.

I'm just going to park myself at the city gates, and wait for you to show up and give me an answer! (2:1)

### III

Habakkuk was nothing if not bold—wouldn't you say?

It takes a lot of nerve to rant and rave at God like this. Clearly Habakkuk blames God for the injustice that he sees and demands an explanation—and better yet, wants a resolution to the crisis that suits his ethics. That's the prophet's plan. The prophet's writings reveal that God had a different plan.

God's response to the Habakkuk's protest was to challenge the prophet to become part of the solution that he sought.

Step one in the justice-seeking business may well be ranting and raving, but protest is not enough. According to Habakkuk, God said that the prophet must become part of the solution that he seeks.

Write the vision plain; [he explains] spell it out in capital letters.  
Paint it on a billboard, so that even a runner could read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
It speaks of the end, and does not lie.

Do not give up.  
Remember, the righteous live by faith.

#### IV

I wonder what injustice you see in the world today. What's got you so fired up that you are ready to pound the pavement, ready to grab your picket signs, and shout at God, saying: "How long?...Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?"

I don't know about you, but my list is pretty long. So I'll just have to stick with a topic that's been on the forefront of my mind this fall. It has to do with the issues confronting several of public schools in the Eden Area.

Over the course of the last couple of months, I have participated in several research actions associated with the Hayward Unified School District (HUSD), particularly Cherryland Elementary, which is one of the schools in closest proximity to our church campus, and a school where some of the children in our Sunday School attend. Through these actions I've learned that there are a lot of great things going on at our local schools, but that we have a long way to go.

Some of the good news is that there is great parent support and involvement at Cherryland. Jim Fryer and I participated in a research action and parent meeting at Cherryland Elementary last month. The school lunch room was packed with concerned parents and grandparents who articulated problems that need resolution in order for our neighborhood children to get a better education. Many of these same parents who were present at that meeting also volunteer in the classrooms, support field trips, and serve as volunteer coaches in the Undersheriff's afterschool soccer program.

The Cherryland Neighborhood Association recently organized and completed a landscaping and gardening project to beautify the Cherryland campus, and to help teach students about gardening, nutrition, and math. Improvement of the grounds has helped build community pride in the school, and reinforced for our children that what's going on at their school matters to all of us.

Members of Neighborhood Association have also worked with the Undersheriff and school administration to bring a bicycle program to Cherryland Elementary that

emulates a successful model in Oakland. Through this bicycle program, students earn a bike, learn road safety, build positive relationships with law enforcement officials, and develop bicycle maintenance skills.

That's the good news that I've heard and want to share with you.

There's some bad news too, which we all need to be aware of as people of faith and community members. The bad news is that Cherryland Elementary School has had three different principals in the last three years and doesn't yet have a settled principal this year. The interim principal who came out of retirement last month was promised relief by this month, but the school board rejected both of the two semi-finalists proposed by the district, so the district has gone back to the drawing board to recruit candidates.

"How long, oh Lord?" How long must our schools wait for competent, compatible, committed administrators to settle in our communities?

Nearly 900 students are enrolled at Cherryland Elementary, which is a campus originally designed for a student body of less than 500.

The student-teacher ratio at Cherryland and most of our elementary schools in the district is 34-1. This high student teacher ration would be difficult in any circumstances, but is compounded by the fact that 80% of the students at Cherryland are English Language Learners and need more time and attention to reach grade level literacy, because they are trying to learn in two languages.

"How long, oh Lord?" How long must our teachers wait for relief, and for our students to be provided with resources they need to meet the benchmark for their grade levels.

Some more good news is that members of the Cherryland community, through COR (Congregations Organizing for Renewal), helped prepare and win a grant to improve our lowest performing schools in the Hayward District. But get this, as the Executive Director of Curriculum for the District explained to me a couple of weeks ago—the terms of that grant forbid using any of the funds to reduce class sizes.

Hello! Who makes up these rules? Even a fifth grader knows that student-teacher ratios have a huge effect on student performance and test outcomes.

"How long, oh Lord?" How long will our administrators' and teachers' hands be tied by grant funding guidelines that inhibit the very results that funders claim to promote?

The school librarian at Cherryland Elementary told Jim Fryer and I, during the campus tour last month, that it's been three years since the District allocated even \$1 for the school library. Jim and I observed the technology class in session and watched well-disciplined students trying to follow their teacher's lesson while using computers that were missing multiple keys.

During that same visit, we were told by the school principal that she didn't have a working printer in her office, and we sat and painfully listened to the school janitor try to get a broken-down PA system in the lunchroom to work for the principal, to no avail.

"How long, oh Lord?" How long must our school leaders and students struggle to achieve their performance goals without the basic resources needed to achieve them?

Given the challenges that our evident in our local schools—particularly in our underperforming schools—is it any wonder that two-thirds of the children at Cherryland Elementary School cannot read and write English at grade level. Is it any wonder that two-thirds of the students are below the benchmark in math and science skills? No.

## V

I could rant and rave all day long. I believe deeply in the value of a good education. I am particularly a fan of public education. Like John Dewey, I believe that public schools are the classroom of democracy. Our democracy cannot succeed without strong schools; neither can our economy.

I could rant and rave all day long, just like Habakkuk. I could throw up my hands and say, "Ain't it awful?" And, "Thank God, I'm a preacher and not a public school teacher!" But ranting and raving isn't enough—at least not according to Habakkuk. After the protest comes the challenge to become part of the solution: "Write the vision; Make it plan, so that a runner may read it," God says to Habakkuk.

Here's the vision as I see it. I'm spelling it out.

In order for our local schools to improve, we will need to work together as a congregation and community to do the following:

1. Ensure a more equitable distribution of financial resources for students across the state
2. Ensure safer schools and neighborhoods through anti-bullying and gang prevention programs
3. Lower teacher-student ratios by dividing campuses; allocating more funding for classroom instruction; and adopting alternate staffing models
4. Develop better communication among administrators and parents about ways that parents can support their children's education and school—especially among parents who don't have a lot of money, formal education, or Social Security cards

5. Identify, recruit, and retain school administrators who are culturally competent and committed to investing in and turning around underperforming schools
6. Develop strong mentoring programs and incentives for supporting and retaining teachers in the neighborhoods where they serve

These are the kinds of issues that I'm committed to working on and that Eden-Cherryland COR is committed to working on—not just for a few weeks or a year—but for as long as it takes to improve our public schools.

More good news is that a bunch of our COR members and other volunteers worked on the Candidates' Forum that we hosted here at Eden Church last Tuesday night which brought 100 people to our campus to hear parent concerns and meet most of the candidates running for the HUSD Board.

I'm grateful to everyone who participated in the phone-banking last week, who turned out for that occasion, who sat in the chairs and listened with "voting ears," who provided transportation, childcare, and hospitality for our neighbors. I am also grateful for those of you who stayed home and prayed for those who were here, and who are busy working supporting schools where their children attend or that are closer to where they live.

I'll be even more grateful if every last one of you goes to the polls on Tuesday and votes your conscience in whatever school district you vote, because all of our children and all of our schools need our attention and support.

The next School Improvement meeting for the HUSD will be here at Eden Church on Thursday, November 11, from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. You don't have to be a Hayward voter to attend. You just need to care about the children in our congregation and our neighborhood and the quality of education that they're receiving or not. You don't need to be an expert on school improvement. Bottom line—you just need to want to be part of the solution. The relationships and strategies needed to fulfill the vision can be developed and learned along the way. Amen.