

# “The Vision that Awaits Its Time”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

August 28, 2005

Text: “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:3).

This past week there were two events that shaped the sermon this morning. The first was the annual staff retreat that was held at The Orchard Inn in Saluda, North Carolina, on Wednesday and Thursday. For a number of years now our staff has had the opportunity to enjoy this beautiful setting in the mountains of Western North Carolina, as we work together and plan for the year ahead. As I listened to the number of reports about the ministries of our church, I could not help but think about the growth of our church over the past two decades in almost every aspect of our ministry. Today we have four weekly worship services, two on Sunday morning, one at noon on Wednesday, and our newest service, First @ Five on Sunday afternoon. We have an active Weekday School and Child Development Center that bring 350 children to our church each weekday. We have expanded our Christian Education, our Pastoral Care, our music ministry, our ministry to children and youth as well as our outreach to our community. Today, there are 36 full- time and part-time paid staff members of our church. In addition to these there are over sixty teachers on the staff of our Weekday School and Child Development Program, bringing the total number of staff members of our church to close to 100. As I listened

to the members of our church staff wrestle with issues and opportunities facing our church as well as presenting their own plans and dreams, I found myself somewhere between

There was, however, another event that was very much on my mind this week, as we gathered at Saluda and returned to Charlotte on Thursday. On Monday of this past week we received a call from one of the hospitals that one of our members, a young mother who was pregnant and critically ill. Over the weekend this young mother entered the hospital with severe headaches. After extensive testing the doctors discovered that she had a brain tumor and within a few hours she was dead, leaving behind a grieving husband, family, and child.

In some way these two events help to define the mission and the ministry of our church. On one level, we are what some would call a “program church.” We are a church of 2,100 members with a host of programs that include worship, education, children’s ministry, ministry to older adults, outreach and a variety of other activities that seek to strengthen the ties between members and their church.

But, on the other hand, we are foremost and fundamentally a community of faith that finds its existence and meaning in God’s love in Jesus Christ. That means that in a very basic way we exist to bind the wounds of the brokenhearted, whether those individuals are bereaved family members, street people, homeless people, or children at risk and somehow the mission of First Presbyterian Church is carried on in the tension of these two very important activities.

## I.

The scripture lesson this morning is taken from one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, the prophet Habakkuk. Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk. He is certainly not a household name. The book that bears his name contains only three chapters. Most Old Testament scholars place his ministry in the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century and early 6<sup>th</sup> Century before the birth of Christ. He was a contemporary of the great prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied in that period of time when the Babylonian armies under Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, destroying city and temple, and taking back into exile in Babylon the king and many of the ablest citizens of the nation of Judah.

One of the themes that occupies this small book is the theme of “theodicy,” which has to do with the justice of God. Habakkuk contains some of the most powerful laments in the Old Testament that rise in complaint about how things are the world.

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you, violence!  
And you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2)

Habakkuk looks at the world around him and sees violence and injustice. He calls for God to respond, but finds no response. In the passage from which we read this morning the prophet stands at his watchtower waiting for some response from God. He hears in the answer of

God a word of hope. The just shall live by faith. There is a vision that awaits its time. This morning I want to speak to the nature of that vision and how it shapes the ministry of this particular church.

## II.

To begin, the church is a community that lives in the tension of knowing and not knowing the truth. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that “God’s ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8). Habakkuk belongs in that distinguished group of Old Testament who looked out on the world about them and wondered where in the midst of all of the pain and suffering was this almighty God.

“How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?  
How long will your wrath burn like fire?” (Psalm 89: 46)  
“Why does the way of the wicked prosper?  
Why do those who are treacherous thrive?” (Jeremiah 12: 1b)

Habakkuk understands this. There is no simple quid pro quo in life. The righteous are not always rewarded. The wicked are not always punished. Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, was the witness to one of the most horrible periods in all of Israel’s history when the godless Chaldeans poured out destruction on the people of Israel.

And yet, in the midst of all the suffering, in the midst of all the injustice, there was something that would not let him go.

“Art thou not from everlasting?” he asks.  
“O lord, my God, my Holy One?  
“You shall not die” (Habakkuk 1:12a).

Habakkuk does not so much give us intellectual answers to the problem of evil. Rather he teaches us how to go on living and believing in God, even when we do not have all the answers. Jesus did not cite Habakkuk in summing up the law by saying that we are called to “love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, and mind” (Matthew 22: 34-40), In Romans 1:17 the Apostle Paul did. In that famous passage Paul writes:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “the one who is righteous shall live by faith.”

These same words inspired the great Reformer Martin Luther, who in his own struggle between faith and doubt discovered the power of the words of Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith.”

## III.

There is another tension in this vision that awaits its time and it is the tension that is found in the church as a caring, healing community and as a community that is challenged to transform the society around it in the name of Christ.

One of the discussions that occupied our staff this week was the balance of striving to provide outreach to our community as well as pastoral care to members of our church with their own personal needs. Many today view the church as an agent of change. They want the church to be at the forefront of social, political, and economic challenge. And certainly that is part of the call of Christ to our church at this time.

Today, we live in a time in which churches need to renew their commitment to the community in which we live. There is a crisis in public education today that unless addressed has the potential for undermining every success and comfort we enjoy. There is a crisis in our inner city neighborhoods that unless addressed could bring social havoc and chaos to the entire city. There is a crisis in our community between the very rich and the very poor that unless it is resolved threatens the very social fabric of our city.

As a church we are called to get off the sidelines and into the midst of struggle. To fail to do this is to fail to heed the most basic commands of the Bible and the ministry of Jesus to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit those in prison, and to care for the least of these.

But the church also has a responsibility to care for its own members. Peter Brown, in his magnificent biography Augustine of Hippo, points out that that the Pelagian controversy of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century between Augustine and Pelagius was in the final analysis about the nature of the church and therefore about pastoral care. Pelagius was a British monk who reacted very negatively toward the corruption and vice of the Roman Empire. He wanted the church to be without spot or wrinkle. He saw the church as a group of morally perfect people called to form a counter culture to the Roman Empire. Augustine, however, saw the church in a much different fashion. For Augustine the church was a community of sinful people who lived in light of God's grace. For Augustine the church was not a group of "moral elite," but rather he saw the church as an 'inn for convalescence'. Augustine understood the mission of the church not only as one of changing society, but for caring for individuals. It was a place where the complacent were stirred up, the ill received healing, and the lonely received companionship.

As the people of God, we are all called to live on the boundary of caring for those within the church as well as those without.

#### IV.

Then, too, the vision that awaits its time calls each of us to move beyond the comfort of the past to the future that God is holding before us. First Presbyterian Church today is now facing some of the most important opportunities in its entire history. The continued revitalization of Uptown Charlotte is occurring within a radius of a very few blocks of this church. This fall a new basketball arena will open in Uptown Charlotte, as will ImaginOn: The Joe and Joe Martin Center, which will house a children's library and theater. Within the shadow of this church five

new condominium projects are rising from the ground that will bring hundreds of new residents within walking distance of this church. The campus of Johnson and Wales University brings to our neighborhood hundreds of students who are part of that culinary school. This past week a new Transit Center was announced for West Trade Street that will bring a train station back to the center city and will bring a trolley system back on West Trade Street.

The great temptation that faces our church today is the temptation of complacency. In the face of massive change there will be those of us who will be content with things just the way they are.

That is why the Long-Range Planning Committee of our Church chose for its theme the admonition of the Apostle Paul that we are called not to be conformed to world, but to be transformed by the mind of Christ.

Someone remarked recently that small dreams do not have the power to inspire. Only large dreams can do that. And that is the vision that awaits its time. It is the vision that calls us to dream great dreams for the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to transform this city.

If not Charlotte, North Carolina, then where?  
If not First Presbyterian Church, then who?  
It not now, then when?

Amen!