Singing the blues: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 137; Luke 17:5-10

by Paul Keim in the September 18, 2007 issue

Habakkuk has a complaint. There is violence. There is wrongdoing and trouble. Ruin and strife and contention are in his face. He cries out for help, but God doesn't seem to be listening. He sounds the alarm, but God does not show up to make things right. As a result, the institutions of law are paralyzed and justice is intermittent. The wicked have the righteous by the short hairs, and that which passes for justice is crooked as a dog's hind leg.

The Lord's answer (Hab. 1:5-11) is an announcement that sounds more disastrous than the problem. The Chaldeans are coming! The Chaldeans are coming! Once again Habakkuk takes up an impassioned complaint (1:12-17). How can an everlasting God, a holy God, an immortal Lord with an intolerance for injustice, have commissioned such a nation to execute judgment? How can a God whose eyes are too pure to even look on evil tolerate treachery? How can the prophet's God be silent and absent when these ruthless Chaldeans swallow up those more righteous than themselves? The world has become a watery deep, the people like fishes, and the predator of the deep is overfishing with hooks and nets. Is the predator to be allowed to swallow his prey with impunity, as happens among the sea creatures who have no ruler?

The prophet stands at his watchpost waiting to see what answer the Lord will give. The answer, when it comes, is remarkable not for its content, but for the instructions about its disposition. The vision is to be written clearly on the tablets, not (as in the NRSV) "so that a runner may read it," but so that the reader may run. It is written down (cf. Isa. 8:1, 30:8) so that a hustling herald may bring it to those who need to hear it. And what is the running reader to recite? There is indeed a vision for the appointed time. Yes, the intolerable present may linger and tarry. Wait. The new thing is coming. The perceived delay will not be endless. In the meantime, the proud will continue their puffed-up and arrogant ways. Their restless greed will never be satisfied, but their time will come. Meanwhile, the righteous one lives by faith.

A different kind of complaint reverberates from the banks of the ancient Tigris. Its anguish is distilled in the haunting question: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a

foreign land?" (Ps. 137:4). The eloquence of the lament reflects the unimaginable loss of Jerusalem and the temple. Yet coupled with the numbed pathos of captivity is a formulaic expression of moral resistance. It begins with an oath not to forget Jerusalem (vv. 5-6). Forgetting brings death. Remembrance brings life. The imprecations that complete the poem represent another form of moral persistence. Though the world and its orders have been turned upside down, there is a moral order encoded in the memory of the Creator, who is enjoined to hold Edom and Babylon responsible for their deeds. Control over the fate of the perpetrators rests ultimately with God alone.

Is it possible to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Not right away. Not at the behest of one's captors, perhaps. But eventually, if one is to live, there are deeds that must be done and songs that must be sung. This is apparently what the exiles of Judah learn to do. Some learn it so well that when the opportunity to return to their native land presents itself, many have become settled enough to remain "by the rivers of Babylon" where they thrive and sing their songs.

Perhaps this is an apt metaphor for contemporary immigrant experience. Of course migrations are driven by economic and political factors as well as by war—how can families be fed and where might better security be found when it has become impossible at home? Beyond the quest to meet the basic needs of food and shelter, there is the need to re-create a home away from home. That's why immigrants tend to congregate around shared language and culture, keeping alive the sights and sounds of that which has been left behind. Both the contradictions and comforts of "singing the Lord's song in a foreign land" are evident in the immigrant experience. It is clearly not the same as being at home, and yet such congregating represents a real refuge from the daily abrasiveness of the immigrant experience. When you are reminded every waking hour that you are "different," when you are captive to difficult work conditions and tenuous economic circumstances, when your life is filled with a thousand indignities from the zenophobic to the philanthropic, you need a place of refuge.

And what of those of us whose home is the immigrants' foreign land? How might this metaphor reshape the moral imagination of us "captors" who offer (or benefit from) labor without dignity and opportunity without hope? Perhaps it could awaken a deeper empathy for those who struggle to make sense of a world turned on its head, as well as stimulating more direct action on their behalf.

Admittedly, immigration is only one of many seemingly intractable problems we face these days. Throwing up our hands in exasperation has become almost second nature. We can understand the impulse of the apostles who come to Jesus and say: “Increase our faith!” Jesus’ response is predictably enigmatic but also troubling. Rather than challenging the institution of slavery, he makes a point about the proper attitude our devotion to God should take. In serving God, he says, we humans are like slaves: we are doing only what needs to be done. His more salient point? In order to do God’s work, we need faith only the size of a mustard seed.