

# Reformation and Reconciliation

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**October 30, 2016 (Reformation Sunday)**  
**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4**

We visited Washington, D.C. this summer. We have close friends whose daughter works in the White House, and she was able to score us get a tour. Things have changed since I was a kid, when my family toured the White House after simply calling our congressional representative's office. It felt then like we had the run of the place. Because of September 11 and other attacks on the White House itself, there are fewer tours, restricted in scope, with an extensive security application process.

It was a very hot and humid day and we were glad to finally maneuver the lines and enter the building – half expecting to see Jed Bartlett (from the West Wing) or Fitzgerald Grant (from Scandal) but not wanting so much to see Frank Underwood (from House of Cards).

Before I tell you the most significant part of our visit, two other things. As we were waiting in an outer corridor for the official tour to begin, I looked down. A dog. A black, fluffy dog, brushing up against my leg. And then another! It was Bo and Sunny, the White House dogs, coming back in from a walk around the grounds. Even though I am not a dog person, that was cool.

Then, later, we saw a line of women walking through another room, all wearing sashes and tiaras. It was Miss America and the 50 state pageant winners, receiving their own private tour. An hour later, when our tour was done and we were at a sandwich shop gulping down another bottle of water, we saw the women crossing the street in a kind of pageant formation. I very unashamedly yelled out "Hey, Miss New York" a block or so away, and a woman waved to us. That was cool, too.

But in between those things, something even more exciting happened, and ultimately much more meaningful. As we were waiting to enter one of the main White House rooms, we suddenly detected lots of activity. People were scurrying around. Snipers appeared with very serious looking weapons. Then we looked out a window and saw a helicopter landing. It was Marine One, the presidential helicopter, landing on the White House lawn. We watched as dozens of staffers moved from here to there to prepare the helicopter for entry by its very important passengers. Michelle Obama appeared and walked across the lawn and climbed the stairs. Then just a moment or two later President Obama did the same thing, really, just a few yards from us, though we were separated by inches of thick, bullet-proof glass. And then like that the helicopter ascended and flew off, presumably to Andrews Air Force Base. For a civics geek like me, it was all very, very, very cool.

But it became more meaningful several hours later as we returned to the hotel and I flipped on the TV. The president and first lady were in Dallas, speaking at the memorial service for the 5 Dallas police officers who were shot and killed, with nine other officers and 2 civilians wounded, killed on duty during an otherwise peaceful protest of two African-American men who were shot and killed, in Louisiana and Minnesota, by police officers. Killed in the line of duty at an event protesting the very conduct of that duty elsewhere.

I thought of the president as he got on the helicopter just a few short hours before. What on earth to say? I thought about the confluence of all that and our modest brush with it – race and police and protest, Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter and gun violence. What on earth

does one say – again – to a nation seemingly trapped in a vortex from which we cannot escape and which this campaign has only seemed to intensify. What does one say?

I could read the president's entire speech and we could be benefitted this morning. But here's just a portion: "...with an open heart, we can learn to stand in each other's shoes and look at the world through each other's eyes...With an open heart, we can abandon the overheated rhetoric and the oversimplification that reduces whole categories of our fellow Americans not just to opponents, but to enemies. With an open heart, (we can) embark on the hard but necessary work of negotiation, the pursuit of reconciliation." The pursuit of reconciliation.

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It is Reformation Sunday, perhaps my favorite Sunday of the church year. It happens during a "year of reconciliation." We mark Reformation Sunday as the time, now 499 years ago, when the German priest Martin Luther nailed 95 theses, protestations, on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. In our particular tributary of that Protestant movement, John Calvin and others formed what we know as the Reformed church, of which Presbyterianism is a major branch, with particular ways of thinking and organizing and acting.

On some Reformation Sundays, I like to think about the interior life of the church. On other Reformation Sundays I like to think about how all this matters in the world, what it means for the Protestant and Reformed and Presbyterian church to be in the world, what it means for you and me – as Presbyterians, loosely affiliated or otherwise – to live in the world, as Presbyterians, of course, but more fundamentally as people of faith. This is one of those years, on a Reformation Sunday just one week and two days before we cast our votes in a presidential election that feels like no other in my adult life, with implications for who we will be long after the votes are cast and a winner is declared.

In some ways, our task is President Obama's task – what on earth do we say, how on earth do we act, in this world where the pursuit of reconciliation, let alone anything that comes even close to achieving it, seems so elusive. And I admit that I am not particularly optimistic. But I am hopeful. Optimism acts as if everything is going to be OK. Hope, Anna Deavere Smith says, "has to do not with thinking everything's going to be OK, but seeing that it's not and then (moving) anyway." So I am hopeful as I, with you, act out our faith in the world with all the evidence to the contrary, seeking to live into a vision of reconciliation fortified by justice and love.

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They are called the "minor prophets," but there is nothing minor about them. The brief oracles lodged at the end of the Old Testament that we whiz by every few years on our way to something else. Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. And today – Habakkuk. It is likely that Habakkuk was written 600 or so years, plus or minus, before the life of Jesus, but that is uncertain, as is the particular historical or religious circumstance. What is certain, however, is the prophet's central concern for justice, and the seeming perseverance of injustice in the world, as Ted Hiebert writes, "real-world politics (appearing to be) continually at odds with the prophetic passion for justice and faith in God's just rule." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VII, page 624)

How do we believe in the face of an exceedingly and overwhelmingly unjust world? A question for 2600 years ago; a question for this very moment. How long will I cry for help, God, and you will not listen?

And yet, in the face of violence, injustice, despair, I will stand and wait and watch. And to the prophet, finally, God responds. "Write the vision. Make it plain and clear and big so all can see

it. For there is still a vision. It is true and strong and it is to be believed.” Hopeful, even if not optimistic, in the face of all evidence, because of this vision.

The African-American theologian Lewis Baldwin writes of Habakkuk: “The word (vision) is often associated with one's sense of sight or the capacity to see with one's eyes, but in the larger sense *vision* involves seeing or perceiving what is not actually visible to the eye; whether by some intellectual sharpness or divine endowment. Vision requires extraordinary sight, an anticipatory spirit, imagination, and the capacity to dream what might appear on the surface to be the impossible dream.” Baldwin writes: “The prophet of God in any age becomes the visionary who is willing and ready to discern the purpose of God as it marches through history. The best humans can do is to remain spiritually and morally active while waiting for the fullness of the divine answer.”

God assures the questioning Habakkuk that God is indeed alive and well and active in the world. We may not always perceive or understand, but God is here. Have faith. That's the vision.

Scholar Dennis Bratcher asks the question that I often ask, and perhaps you do as well: "Even if God really is working to address the injustice of the world around us, how shall we live as God's people in a world that we experience as unjust? What does it mean to be faithful in order to live?"

How do we reformers (and we are all reformers!) sustain the vision? Our forbear John Calvin believed strongly in civic government and its capacity to govern. Is Calvin spinning in his unmarked grave right now? What would Habakkuk say?

This is not about HRC vs. the Donald. That is not appropriate for me to say to you anyway, and, as one of our Reformed and Presbyterian values affirms: “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” So listen to your conscience. Listen hard to your conscience, and vote. Definitely vote. Don't sit this out!

And even if you are not optimistic, and the tenor of this campaign has not made me more so, be hopeful. Be hopeful that God is somehow active and alive. Our role as people of faith is not to buy into cynicism and ugliness and despair, but to proclaim the vision.

The vision will look like many things. One of the things it will look like is reconciliation.

Reconciliation will be about who we are as a people. We can disagree on many things, and we will. One of the tragedies of this campaign, I believe, is that it's been so void of ideas and so focused on personal attacks. We can disagree on many things, how to address this problem, how to solve that one. Reconciliation will not smooth over differences, but it will have something to say about how we treat each other, red and blue and any and every color, on November 9 and following as well as on November 8, how we talk about each other, whether in the corridors of power or in the anonymity of cyberspace. And we – each of us – can decide how we will act and how we will participate in this arena.

And reconciliation will be, finally, about the vision. It will be about racial justice. It will be about children. It will be about peace. It will be about how women are talked about and treated. It will be about all those different from us – immigrants and refugees, people living in poverty in our cities and rural areas. Reconciliation can only flourish if we walk and work with one another, and it can only flourish if the values of justice and love are on the table and at the center of the conversation.

On this Reformation Sunday, here are our marching orders...

Be prophets.

Be protesters.

Be reformers.

Be citizens.

Be hopeful.

Write the vision – in the face of injustice, it is justice. In the face of hate, it is love. In the face of brokenness, it is reconciliation. Thanks be to God. Amen.