

“History Has Its Eyes On You”: Hamilton, Habukkuk and How Great Thou Art

“Hamilton: An American Musical”, made its way from the Broadway stage into the homes of millions earlier this summer, when a highly anticipated filming of the stage production was released on Disney’s streaming service.

If you have somehow escaped hearing about Hamilton, it is an artistic musical depiction of Ron Chernow’s biography of American Founding Father and Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Created by Lin-Manuel Miranda, non-white actors are cast as the founding fathers. Sung and rapped through 46 songs; Miranda has described it as the story of “America then, as told by America now.”

Throughout the musical, the Founding Fathers are obsessed with the legacy they will leave. George Washington, sings the words, “History has its eyes on you...” This line and this sentiment appear throughout the musical as the question gets asked, “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story.”

“History has its eyes on you” has in the years since Hamilton’s stage release and the popularity and availability of the album across various music streaming services, become a rallying cry. It has been plastered on signs held up at protests and marches.

Hamilton, the movie (as its been called) is a 2016 filming of the Broadway stage production. It is not a new version.

Hamilton made its off-Broadway debut in 2015, towards the end of the second term of the Obama presidency.

Our current context of a global pandemic, protests against white supremacy, police brutality, the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor (amongst far too many others), the activism of Black Lives Matter, conversations being had about systemic racism, and the gas-lighting of world leaders, is a complex, unique, and entirely different moment in history.

Our world has changed, the musical has not.

It was clear on Twitter and in various cast interviews, that “History had its eyes on” Hamilton, on Lin-Manuel Miranda and the cast. Many of the Founding Fathers were slaveholders, and yet this is not musical about slavery. Lin-Manuel Miranda and the cast have, for the most part engaged these conversations, embraced the questions, and acknowledged the criticisms.

Miranda tweeting in response, “All the criticisms are valid. The sheer tonnage of complexities and failings of these people [the Founding Fathers] I couldn’t get. Or wrestled with but cut. I took 6 years and fit as much as I could in a 2.5 hour musical. Did my best. It’s all fair game.”

All the criticisms are valid.

What makes Habakkuk different from other prophetic books, is that rather than God confronting the people through the prophet; Habakkuk is a prophet who confronts God.

The dominant literary device used to convey the prophetic message in Habakkuk is a first person dialogue between the prophet and God.

Our passage this morning begins with Habakkuk’s questions and criticism to God. How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry, “violence!” and you will not save?” Why are you making me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? There is destruction and violence before me, contention and strife are rising, the law is slack, justice never prevails, the wicked surround the righteous, and judgment comes out perverted.

Essentially Habakkuk confronts God in a Hamilton-esqe “history-has-its-eyes-on-you” way, with the central question, “How can the violence and evil of the world serve God’s purposes?”

How can it? When we pick up the newspaper or turn on the evening news or log onto Facebook perhaps we find ourselves relating to Habakkuk and confronting God with similar questions.

How do we respond to the evils and hurts in our world? How do we engage the criticisms or struggle with the questions?

“How Great Thou Art” is one of the most beloved hymns of the 20th century. The hymn is based on a Swedish traditional melody and poem written by Carl Boberg in 1885.

Boberg was walking home in his bayside town on Sweden’s south-eastern coast when a thunderstorm sent him running for shelter. When the storm began to relent, he rushed

home. Safe at home he opened his windows to let in the fresh bay breeze, the tranquility of the calm after the storm stirred him as church bells sounded in the distance, and he penned, “O Store Gud.”

One of the first things, I learned in a Hebrew Bible course in my undergrad is that there is no translation without interpretation.

The first English version was translated by Swedish-American E. Gustav Johnson and first appeared in hymn books in North America in 1925 as “O Mighty God.” Johnson’s version with its nine verses closely followed the original Swedish. This is not however, the version we have come to know.

A version of the hymn translated from Swedish, to German, to Russian was translated into English from the Russian by English Salvation Army missionary Stuart Hine, who took some liberties with his translation, added two original verses, including the 3rd verse.

This Hymn was popularized by American evangelist crusades, recorded by Elvis (and various others) and by the early 1970s began to replace E. Gustav Johnson’s version in the hymnals. That is the version we have come to know, and the version featured in today’s service.

In churches an argument employed far too often is, “we’ve always done it this way.” Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of given to the church during this time is a 5-month detox from, “But we’ve always done it this way!” This reasoning is not helpful, and when it comes to the singing of “How Great Thou Art” it is also not true.

The third verse, of Stuart Hine’s version uses the words,
*“And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.”*

This verse is problematic pastorally and theologically, many of my colleagues will ask that it be omitted. This is an easy approach, one which allows congregants to still sing their favourite hymn. At a time when problematic sculptures are being removed from the village square, bands are being renamed, food is being rebranded, when we are challenged to be critical of that which we consume and history has its eyes on us, does this approach suffice?

The atonement theology of this verse is articulated in such a careless way that it makes God sound like an angry, abusive and neglectful parent.

When paired with the Church's participation in abuse, through Residential Schools and abuses committed by clergy this is incredibly harmful. This verse and the theology it conveys have been weaponized to justify abuse and exploitation. Abusers and exploiters who convince the abused that the hurt is justified because of their wickedness and evil, and the abusers have been divinely appointed to bring God's justice.

Knowing this, what do we do? One thing is certain, history has its eyes on you church.

We can no longer be passive consumers of the hymns we sing, the creeds we say, the prayers we pray, and so forth. "But we've always done it this way," no longer suffices as an answer or a reason, and truthfully, it never did.

The dialogue between Habakkuk and God perhaps helps us to engage in these questions. Where is God in the violence and evil of the world?

The response comes to Habakkuk, "Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! A work is being done in your days that you would not believe!"

That sounds like a good start, right?

Not quite. The response turns into an oracle of judgment, which will be brought by the Chaldeans an enemy of extraordinary might. "They all come for violence, with faces pressing forward; they gather captives like sand."

God's judgment is being carried out in a violent way by an enemy of God's people.

Now it is assumed this response is from God, but the speaker is not explicitly identified, and does not directly respond to the questions being asked. Not surprisingly, Habakkuk is not satisfied with this response. He poses further questions.

"Are you not from of old, Holy one, my God? Your eyes are too pure to behold such evil. When will your mercy come?" The prophet commits to keep watch and listen for God's answer.

God speaks, Habakkuk is told to write the vision on tablets to preserve it for the time when it will be fulfilled. The righteous are upheld as those who live by faith and trust the reliability that God will fulfill the vision.

5 oracles of woe against the wicked are then given. Habakkuk then responds to God in prayer. The prayer ends with trust and joy at God's presence amidst the trouble, saying: "I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
And makes me tread upon the heights.”

Faith and hope are not guarantees of a smooth path and pain free life. They do not mean that violence will be erased and disease ended.

What is promised is the Peace of Christ, God’s presence with us. This is not a simple, easy, half-hearted peace, but a peace that passes all-understanding and promises to never leave us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned his prayerful poem “Who Am I?” in prison, shortly before his execution by Nazis. The poem struggles with questions about self-perception and the perceptions others have about us. Bonhoeffer ends it by saying, “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine, Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”

Bonhoeffer’s poem when looking at the violence and evil of the world ends with profession of faith similar to Habakkuk’s prayer.

Seeing, feeling, and knowing the Peace of Christ amidst the violence, hurt, and pain in our world is challenging.

One of my favourite quotes comes from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Letters to a Young Poet,” it sits in a frame on my bookshelf with the gentle reminder:

“Have patience with everything that remains unresolved within your heart and try to love *the questions themselves*, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live the questions now*. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Rilke’s patience is deliberate, intentional, and active waiting. It is not passive, it is learning not be anxious or fearful about the things that remain unresolved. It is practicing faith by living with the questions, by allowing ourselves to truly experience the questions.

The journey of faith is not one of having all the answers. It is one of continually asking the questions. Coming to love the questions. Trusting that God will meet us in our questions. A journey of looking back at history and looking forward in hope, casting “but we’ve always

done it this way” aside and with love for God and love for neighbour stepping forward with faith. Knowing that guided by light of God’s love we will live our way into the answer.

To God be all the glory. Amen.