There comes a time in growing up, or at least there did for me, when I realized that a lot of nursery rhymes were really dark. They were about falling babies, egg men who break and crack and old men who sustain serious head trauma while simply trying to go bed. Having never written nor been present when someone else was writing a nursery rhyme I can’t know the reason for this darkness, but in our day and age when did lack of knowledge ever stop someone from giving their opinion? So here is my opinion about the dark night of the nursery rhymes soul; these nursery rhymes were partly meant as a way to get kids used to reality. Sometimes bad things happen in this world and often there is a seeming randomness or even injustice to it all. As best I can tell the old man just wanted to get some sleep, he was not doing anything that made him deserve to bump his head. Similarly with reality bad things happen to people who do not seem deserving of such things. If you want a real life example here is one: this past week the Communist Party of China decided to throw itself a big party to celebrate its 75 years awesomeness. Absent from this celebration was any mention of the Great Leap Forward, a time in which according to the British newspaper The Independent, “At least 45 million people were worked, starved or beaten to death in China over… four years.” 45 million people died because a crazy loon like Mao Zedong thought it was a good idea to, among other things destroy a “third of all homes in China…to produce fertilizer.” Terrible things happen in this world and those things often happen to people who are quite innocent and so maybe nursery rhymes were rather subversively giving kids a heads up to not be surprised when all did not go well in the tree top.

Now I bring this up not just to indict old butchers like Chairmen Mao but rather to point out that there are struggles in life and often these struggles make little sense to us. Today in our readings we hear about these struggles and the way that the prophet Habakkuk deals with them opening with this rather stinging lament. He says, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? ….. The wicked surround the righteous-therefore judgment comes forth perverted. “ Here we have a man who while struggling to understand how God can let such rotten things happen, lays some of the blame at God’s feet. Habakkuk is crying to God about the wrong in this world and also saying that God is doing nothing about it. He is a man of faith but a man who sees that life is not all sunshine and lollipops and is trying to understand how a God of justice allows for such injustice.

The New Interpreter’s Bible puts it this way, “Habakkuk gives prominent attention to a persistent and troubling problem that challenges this prophetic confidence in God’s justice: the perseverance of injustice in the world.….This problem, maintaining a belief in God’s just rule in spite of an unjust world, is the central issue around which the book of Habakkuk as a whole has taken shape.” And that seems to be the real sticking point. We believe that God is a God of justice and love and yet we look around and see that so much is wrong. How can we reconcile these two seemingly opposite truths?

There is the obvious theological answer. We live in a fallen world and God’s Kingdom is not yet fully realized and that is a good and correct answer, but it does not answer the question of how we are to relate to God when living in times where all is not well. What should our prayer be when we see the innocent suffer and the evil prosper? To answer this I think we actually will need to look at another book in the Old Testament, the Book of Job. If you remember this book it concerns a man named Job, thus the name.

The setup to the story is that Job is a righteous man whose life has gone really well. He has children and wealth. Satan approaches God and tells him that Job is only righteous because God has so richly blessed him. Satan posits that if God took away these blessings then Job would curse God. God disagrees and allows Satan to take away almost everything that Job has, including allowing Satan to kill all of his children and covering him in boils. The book goes on to narrate Job’s and some of his friends’ reactions to the new circumstances in which Job finds himself. These friends of Jobs first insist that he must have done something terribly wrong and so he is being punished for his sins. Later in the book his friend Eliphaz switches from accusing Job of character flaws to telling him to stop whining and to count his blessings, saying, “Are the consolations of God too small for you?” He even takes the familiar God won’t give you more than you can handle tact saying, “Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore despise not the chastening of the Almighty.” Job for his part does not curse God, but he is certainly not happy about his new lifestyle. He says things like, “O that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea…..For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.” Or put another way Job is not real happy with God and he lets God know about it.

So what we see here are two different reactions to injustice. One reaction is to say that it’s not really that bad and that we should rejoice in our suffering and so on. The other is to take the route that Habakkuk does today and say that things are bad and we don’t understand how God is allowing this to happen. This is what Job does. So which one is right? Are we to look on our curses as some sort of blessing or are we to tell God how we really feel? Well the good news is God gives an answer to this question at the end of Job. We read, “The Lord said to Eli’phaz the Te’manite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’” What a strange ending. God is mad at the guy who spouted the usual pieties that we hear in bad circumstances and God is happy with the guy who basically told him off. Apparently the right thing is to tell God how you really feel not how we think we are supposed to feel. What this tells me is that God wants us to bear our souls to him. To cry out from the hurt and broken places, not dress things up in a patina of seemingly pious pronouncements. And the reason for this is because God craves an intimate relationship with us.

Do this quick thought experiment. Let’s say something terrible has happened in your life. If you stopped into Starbucks to get a coffee and the barista asked you how your day was going what would you say? You would most likely say that it was going fine, because you would only tell someone you really loved and trusted the anguish that you were going through. If we only interact with God in superficial and happy sounding pronouncements our relationship with him is going to be no deeper than it is with the barista at Starbucks, but that is not the kind of relationship that God calls us into. Now this is not an open invitation to simply blame God for everything. There are times and places where Job’s friends have it right, that we can grow in adversity. The author of Hebrews even tells us that God disciplines those he loves. The problems with Job’s friends was not their answers but that they believed that they had solved everything themselves and did not need to hear from God. Job may have been angry but he also wanted God’s response. Job wanted to understand and grow just like Habakkuk. For remember what Habakkuk says after he has issued his complaint. He says, “I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.” Habakkuk has opened a channel of communication to hear from God. That is what lies at the heart of any good prayer – a wish to hear from God. Yes we should be honest with God but our honesty only matters to the extent that we are willing to listen for God’s response because that is the way for us to grow into God’s likeness both this day and forevermore.