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Text: Habakkuk especially Habakkuk 1:2-4; 2:1; 2:4; 3:16-19

Look Up Child

I imagine almost everyone who has ever lived has had at least one Habakkuk moment in their lives. They've looked around and asked, "Where is the goodness in the midst of all the evil and injustice?" Or perhaps for someone who is less noble, at least at that moment, their question is, "Why is this dreadful thing happening to me?"

Before looking further at what's in the book of Habakkuk, let's review how this prophet and his writings fit into the biblical story. Remember the history of the kingdom of Israel. The monarchy was formed in 1020 BCE. One hundred years later, the kingdom divided into two. The northern kingdom was still called Israel. The southern kingdom was called Judah. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians toppled the northern kingdom. They deported about one-third of Israel's citizens and brought in about the same number of foreigners. About 135 years later, the Babylonians finished their conquest of Judah, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and forced many of the citizens to live in exile in Babylon. Habakkuk lived in the southern kingdom before the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon.

(A note about terminology. The United Kingdom was called Israel. After the division, the northern kingdom retained the name of Israel. After the northern kingdom was destroyed, sometimes the southern kingdom of Judah was called Israel. It can be difficult at times to keep it all straight. During the time of Habakkuk, Israel and Judah could be used interchangeably. We see this in the video and poster from The Bible Project.¹)

Habakkuk witnessed the growing power of the Babylonian Empire and their first invasion into Judah. He also witnessed the injustice, evil, and tragedy that were rampant within Judah. He struggled to understand God's goodness in the midst of all of this. The laments, questions and responses preserved in this book are relevant in every age. Habakkuk is classified as a minor prophet because of the brevity of the writing, not its importance.

Let's look at the structure and content of this small book.² Habakkuk begins with a complaint about the situation at home. Why does all the evil in Judah, in Israel's southern kingdom, go unpunished? Life here is intolerable. The nation has become violent, unjust, and corrupt. The majority of the people, especially the leaders, are ignoring God's instructions on how to live. Why isn't God doing anything about it?

God's response is: I'm going to let the Babylonians take care of it. The Babylonians will punish Judah.

Habakkuk is horrified. That's not a solution! Babylon is even worse than we are! They terrify and destroy everyone in their way. They are so proud and confident of their military might that they worship it, they deify it. How can a just god use wicked Babylon to punish a

¹ <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/habakkuk>

² Sources for what follows include *The Bible Project* accessed at <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/habakkuk/>; *Pulpit Fiction* accessed at

https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper26c?utm_source=Pulpit+Fiction&utm_campaign=43c4c441ff-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_10_15_03_34_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_145a0f7624-43c4c441ff-230912277; notes on Habakkuk found in *The Voice Bible* published by Thomas Nelson; and notes on Habakkuk found in *The NIV Study Bible* published by Zondervan.

people more righteous than themselves? This is unfathomable! I'm going to stand here and wait for you, God, to respond to me.

And God does respond saying: I will take care of Babylon. Babylon will be punished and faith will be rewarded. The violence and oppression of nations creates a never ending cycle of revenge. This never ending cycle inevitably brings about the rise and fall of nations.

Actually, God refers Habakkuk to complaint number one. How are you measuring righteousness? All nations will be accountable. I'll punish sin wherever it's found – even among my chosen people – using whatever means I desire.

There are at least three ways in which we would do well to follow Habakkuk's example. First, the prophet is honest with God. He asks questions. He voices his anger and disappointment directly to God. Second, the prophet refuses to leave the relationship. He doesn't use his suffering and lament as a reason to lose faith, to lose hope in God whose steadfast love endures forever. Third, the prophet waits and listens. He's willing to stand and wait for a response. He stops talking and keeps his ears open so he can hear what God has to say. He realizes the importance of keeping in the conversation and staying in the relationship.

Most of us are willing to direct our questions to God, although maybe not as boldly as Habakkuk. How might our relationships with God be if we not only voiced our complaints but also were willing to wait in silence for a response? Sometimes merely asking the question provides a kind of indirect answer. We need to stop and listen to what God is saying.

How might our faith communities look if we modeled this behavior of faithful, honest disagreement? Can we as a congregation speak boldly and truthfully to each other without breaking the covenant that binds us together? We've done it in the past and I trust we can continue to listen to each other and stay in relationship even when we disagree.

Our denomination is facing more potential upheaval as we talk about revising our membership guidelines. I appreciate the words of Glen Guyton, executive director of MCUSA, as he talks about trusting God's spirit to adjust and bend boundaries of fear toward God's divine will and purpose for his life and for the church.³

As part of God's answer to the second complaint, Habakkuk lists five woes directed toward Babylon. It soon becomes obvious that these practices are not unique to Babylon. Given the human condition, most nations eventually become like them. As we read through these, note what sounds familiar – either a practice that is condemned or a consequence or response that is given.

Woe #1:⁴ *Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on? Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their prey. Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

Woe #2:⁵ *Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin! You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.*

³ <http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/the-line-in-the-sand/>

⁴ Habakkuk 2:6b-8, New International Version

⁵ Habakkuk 2:9-11, New International Version

Woe #3:⁶ *Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice! Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

Woe #4:⁷ *Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies! You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory. The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

Woe #5:⁸ *Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it." The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*

This list brings us back to where we started. We too have a bunch of questions and complaints for God. Why do arrogant and predatory people prosper while benevolent and humble people are victimized by a violent, materialistic society? Why do greedy business people and politicians fleece the underprivileged, rarely coming to justice? Why do powerful nations oppress smaller nations for the sake of enslaving people and harvesting natural resources?

We too can expect similar responses from God. The way I work in the world may not be the way you expect or what you're hoping for. As you complain about those people over there, don't forget to look at yourselves. Don't be so certain about who is righteous and who is not.

The book of Habakkuk closes by comparing the ancient exodus and a future exodus when God defeats evil, brings justice and rescues all the oppressed. The prophet ends with a confession of trust and joy in God even in the midst of trouble.⁹

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet 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.

Like Habakkuk, we too trust and find joy in God even in the midst of trouble. God invites us to continue to hope and persevere when all else seems contrary. God encourages us to continue to stop and listen for God's voice. God challenges us to continue to join in God's redemptive activity in the world by doing good work, speaking out against injustice, and worshipping God together.

The title of my sermon comes from a song by Lauren Daigle.¹⁰ Several of Lauren's songs sound a lot like Habakkuk, especially the title song¹¹ from her second album.

⁶ Habakkuk 2:12-14, New International Version

⁷ Habakkuk 2:15-17, New International Version

⁸ Habakkuk 2:18-20, New International Version

⁹ Habakkuk 3:17-19, New Revised Standard Version

¹⁰ <https://laurendaigle.com/>

¹¹ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/laurendaigle/lookupchild.html>

Where are You now when darkness seems to win? Where are You now When the world is crumbling? Oh, I, I hear You say, Look up child, Look up child.

Where are You now when all I feel is doubt? Where are You now when I can't figure it out? Oh, I, I hear You say, Look up child, Look up child.

You're not threatened by the war. You're not shaken by the storm. I know You're in control. Even in our suffering, even when it can't be seen, I know You're in control

Oh, I, I hear You say, I hear you say, Look up child, Look up child, Look up.