

July 19, 2009

The Ways of God

HABAKKUK 1:12-2:1

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Some months ago, I began this sermon series on the prophet Habakkuk on living with unwanted change. After simply one sermon, the rest of the series was put on hold because, well... things changed – as we got our second interim minister. I guess you could say the topic of change was so timely that we couldn't finish it.

In fact, it is rather fitting that this happened. Just as there was a long pause between our readings of Habakkuk then and now, so too there are long pauses in Habakkuk's conversation with God.

So before I read today's scripture, let us recall the situation: Israel has been in a bad place for a really long time. They have had problems with their own leaders. And we can underscore how bad Israel's kings were by simply recalling one solitary fact, which serves as a metaphor: the people of God had actually lost the Bible. There weren't lots of copies lying around like there are today, and the one in the Temple was lost *and* forgotten about. Clearly, the leaders had not been leading the people in the ways of God.

Finally, after years and years, a good king comes, the Bible is rediscovered, and things are put right. Everyone was happy. And after a very long time, things are finally going great. Then it happens: The good king Josiah suddenly dies, and things go right back down the tubes. Unwanted change. And so it is out of this deep frustration of how things have returned to the same old bad ways – that Habakkuk cries out to God.

And so we came to the first prayer in the text before today's reading, when Habakkuk asks God for help with the bad rulers of Israel. God does not answer the prayer, but instead He says that the ruthless nation of Babylon will come and destroy Israel!

Babylon was ruthless. They were so cruel in their practices that they would actually put a big metal hook through people's lower lips and drag a whole line of people away. Other times they would literally cast a net around people and round them up. That is why we have the fish imagery in the passage I am about to read.

In sum, Israel's bad leaders *are* about to go, but not because good leaders are coming, but because the Babylonians are coming. To paraphrase F.F. Bruce, the cure is worse than the disease. And so now, Habakkuk thinks, "The Babylonians are coming? You *have* got to be kidding me." He is stunned, and gets very quiet. You can feel the pause in the text, and, Habakkuk prays a second time:

Habakkuk 1:12 - 2:1 (NIV) O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. ¹³Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

¹⁴You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler. ¹⁵The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. ¹⁶Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. ¹⁷Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?

2:1 I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

That is Habakkuk's second prayer. He is hurting but he is not giving up, and we are beginning to get this sense of back and forth – this conversation – this relationship between this man and God. Habakkuk is compelled to keep praying because he is looking at his country around him. A lot of people around him are going through a hard time. And he does not like the direction that the nation is headed because he knows things are looking bad, and the near future will be worse. He knows this because God has told him the Babylonians are coming. They are about to be dragged off to a foreign country and enslaved.

So much unwanted change has already occurred, and it is about to get really bad. There are no quick and easy fixes. Habakkuk pours out his heart again to God. You can just feel Habakkuk's prayers coming from the bottom of his heart – drenched in agony. How can God possibly let such an *evil* nation as the Babylonians come and enslave Israel? It doesn't make any sense. Some things in life are painful, and some things we will never understand. Like, why is there is such sin in the world? Why we can see evil people prosper?

But there it is. There is the prophet crying out on behalf of the people. They are stuck, and it doesn't make any sense. Habakkuk cries out to God: this isn't right? The evil Babylonians? Who will gloat over them as they conquer them? God, why don't you stop this? And here's the kicker: Habakkuk makes these complaints to God, and God *never* says Habakkuk is wrong. God never says, "The Babylonians aren't so bad; they are actually nicer than Israel," or, "the Babylonians don't worship false idols." No, God never says that, and God never corrects or straightens the prophet out. Not once.

The unwanted changes in life are hard. They cause us anxiety. They remind us that we are not in control of our lives. And a lack of control is really what all anxiety is about. Thinking that we are not in control of our lives is not something that we Americans like to believe. But now, when it's a down economy, and our spouses or our friends' income or job is unsure, we just feel powerless. Or perhaps you are now seeing years and years of careful financial planning for retirement being turned upside down, and life is getting off course. How are we going to keep our lives headed in the direction that we want them to go? So that they won't get off track? How are we going to take care of our families, when our jobs are in danger?

The signs of our lack of control are there. It can be something as simple as driving down the street, and seeing an ambulance with its sirens blaring rushes past you the other way. And in that moment you know that the person in the back of that ambulance is not in control of their lives. Their life has just gone off course.

Even if we don't want to acknowledge it, it happens to all of us at some point. Or you are trying to take care of your aging parents, and it's exhausting, and there's just not much you feel like you can do. Or suddenly you find out you have cancer. Life just went off course. Even though you didn't do anything wrong. So we cry out to God. ...It's the type of thing that pastors get to see all the time.

This is where Habakkuk is. He is stuck in a situation. The future for the next couple years is anything but rosy. He cries out to God, and he gets no answer to his prayer. He only gets a message that the Babylonians, the problems of life, are about to make their grip tighter.

Amidst this helplessness – amidst these circumstances – amidst this unwanted change – Habakkuk keeps going back to God. And even though we'd like to have it all nice and resolved in one sermon or Bible text, we have no such luck.

So Habakkuk prays a second time. How can evil flourish when God is in control? How can those who worship false gods prosper while the faithful suffer? Again and again, Habakkuk does not declare the glories of God – No, instead, again and again, He *questions*. He does this at the very beginning of his second prayer: “O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One...”

What do you do when you are stuck? When you have no control? And you feel anxiety. Or anger. Or pressure. What do you do when you are trapped in the circumstances of life—that may not even be your own doing, and you may not have even done anything wrong—but you are simply living in a down economy or an age of terrorism—what do you do??

You keep crying out to God. And no, it’s not the answer we would want – and your circumstances that make you stuck are so hard and you really don’t want to endure it anymore but you have no choice. You’re powerless. If you could speed it up and get rid of that anxiety, you would have done it already. So we cry out to God *especially* when it’s hard – and *especially* when we do not understand the Ways of God. Just as Habakkuk says, “O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One...”

In all this, in being stuck in the circumstances of life, in being stuck in unwanted change, in not always understanding the ways of God – then we too cry out, “My God, my Holy One...” Or, in the words of Jesus on the cross, who quotes the psalmist, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

My God, my Holy One. My God, my God. This is why in the unwanted change we cry out to God: because *He is our God*. There is none other. Who else are we going to cry out to? As Randall Zachman has said, when life is really hard, we cry out “My God, My God.” It is as if to say: “You, Lord, are my God. You have to listen to me.” Even though we don’t necessarily understand the ways of God, we do know that He is our God. There is a covenant between us; so *He has to listen* to us. Why? He is our God.

And as we cry out to our God, Habakkuk shows us a second thing. Because just as we feel this back and forth between the prophet and God ...in this conversation ...we feel ...the ...*waiting*. Habakkuk cries out. God speaks what he doesn’t want to hear, and the prophet is silenced. He can’t believe what he is hearing. There is pause. He soaks in the message.

It’s going to be hard for a while. The Babylonians are coming. And after waiting – which is the last thing we want to do when we are anxious – Habakkuk grows silent after his prayer. And he waits again. In fact, he prepares to wait. “*I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me...*” He waits, and places his hope in God.

In this calling out to Our God, in knowing God is listening, and in the very difficult period of waiting, even though we will never understand all the Ways of God – we still know that God has a plan for our lives. Jesus still loves us. As hard as it is, calling out “My God, my Holy One” still affirms – still believes in God’s providence. God is in control of our lives; we are not. And then we do get one glimpse into the ways God helps us. It happens after waiting. And so we will hear about it next week. For today, we call out to God because He is our God. He does have a plan for our lives. And soaking in that relationship is a place we all need to be. Amen.

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