

July 26, 2009

In the Meanwhile

HABAKKUK 2:2-20

Rev. Darryl C. Evans

Today we are in the middle of a sermon series on living with unwanted change, and we are deep in this compelling back-and-forth between Habakkuk and God. Last week the prophet kept crying out to God, and we were left waiting with the question, “How will God help us?” Today we hear God’s response, which is a Promise followed by five woes. So let us turn to page 872 of the Old Testament as we read Habakkuk 2:2-20.

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Last week we were caught up in the drama of this Book with Habakkuk’s second prayer. When we left the prophet he had cried out to God about the evil Babylonians those ruthless people who put hooks through peoples’ lips; those evil ones who cast nets around people and dragged them out of their homes – and Habakkuk tells God, “The Babylonians are going to destroy us? They are evil! ...What is going on?” And God never said he was wrong.

Today God answers. He answers in two parts. Let’s take the second part first because it is more concrete. So Habakkuk says, the Babylonians are evil, and God responds, yes they are evil. And, God so hates what the Babylonians are doing that He names specific practices that He will punish them for. God will name a practice and say, “No! No, do not do that!” And when God says “no!” with such passion – we call that a “woe.” We read 5 woes.

These woes are very practical. They are against the Babylonians daily living. God says things like, do not put others in debt: “Woe to you who heap up what is not your own!” Or, do not steal, “Woe to him who builds... by unjust gain.” And so forth. In sum, we learn that self-serving behavior will not succeed.

And in so doing, these woes instruct us. As we are stuck in life in a holding pattern of unwanted circumstances, wondering like Habakkuk, “What do we do now?” these Woes help us. It is as if they ask us: *How do you to live during the wait?* You already know! You already cried out to God about the evil around you. God agreed they were evil. So, don’t do what is evil! Work against those very same things that made you mad in the first place! Live out the opposites of the woes. Whatever has you stuck in anxiety, then do the opposite. ...Are you anxious about not having control of your life? Then take refuge in God’s sovereignty. Are you are surrounded by violence? Then delight in peace. When you see human dignity being devalued, then affirm the image and likeness of God.

Maybe we don’t understand the circumstances of life, but some things we do know. And then we ask ourselves not, “Why is this happening?” but we ask a much scarier question of “How faithful am I being to what God has already revealed to me?”

And as we’re stuck living in between the hard places of life – we’re compelled to search our own hearts to see if there is any of this injustice in us. Is there something in our hearts that we are putting up in the place of God? We don’t literally carve idols out of wood and stone anymore. Today they are unseen, which make them much more difficult.

Perhaps we tell ourselves, “The only thing I need, is to live in the right neighborhood, with the right social circle. Then I will be accepted.” Or, “If I can just find the right person to be with, then I’ll be happy.”

Do we act like Babylonians? “Woe to those who make your neighbors drink... in order to gaze on their nakedness!” That means not to devalue another person for selfish pleasure. And then we ask ourselves what images we have seen on the Internet or satellite TV this past week.

So in God’s two-fold answer, the woes paint a concrete picture of daily life: (Q) How do you to live during the wait? (A) Do not follow in the evil that made you cry out to God in the first place.

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Now this is when things get really exciting, as we come to the best part of our scripture reading today because now we come to the first part of God’s answer. Now we receive ...a Promise. God gives a promise to Habakkuk that is so Good He wants it written down and told to everybody! “*Write the vision, make it plain on tablets so that a runner may read it.*” And what was that written promise? It was this: “the righteous shall live by faith.”

This is not a command; this is a Promise. This is not saying that if we work harder, if we exhaust ourselves living a certain way, life will be better. This is not working to *be* righteous. No, it is addressed to those who already are called “righteous” – meaning those who are in relationship with God.

This is telling us *how* God gives the gift of life. How is abundant life truly received? What is the manner that God graciously gives us life? Through trust. As today’s reading says, “By their faith they shall live.” In other words, through our faith, as we trust in God, God keeps pouring out new life into our hearts.

Or put another way, the Babylonians do not have faith. They are not trusting in God – they are trusting in everything else – their own strength; in their money; in selfish greed; in false idols – they are chasing after those things told to us in the 5 Woes. As verse 4 says: *“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.*”

The Babylonians are chasing after false gods, which are not alive. And since the Babylonians are surrounding themselves with everything except the Living God, the inherent consequence is *they cannot live*. Why? Because Life is found in God and they are chasing after everything but God. We have a choice because we cannot live by our control and by Another’s promise at the same time.

And when we know we are losing the struggle for control in our lives, it ends in blame. Sometimes we blame our elected officials. “If only Congress would pass the right laws, we would get out of this mess.” Or, maybe “if only Congress would stay out of it, things would get better on their own.” Or we blame the greed on Wall Street. Or the terrorists. Or maybe we even blame ourselves. “If I had only worked harder – if I hadn’t made those mistakes – if I had just taken out my retirement earlier I wouldn’t be in this mess...”

We can either strive on our own strength, which never works out -- or we can receive God’s enduring Promise. And that Promise is the Help that Habakkuk was looking for last week. It is the same with us. It gives us a purpose. Now we don’t have to live in our problems because we can live by God’s Promise. We can trade that anxiety over our future – we can trade the fear over the next few years of the economy, for an ongoing Life in God.

The Bible is full of promises. If we simply ask God to reveal them to us, He will. And if we want more understanding – if we want more of those gracious promises of God – then we are reminded again, just as we were with the Woes, not to worry so much about the answers we don’t have, until we ask ourselves: How faithful are we to what we have already been given?

Because as we receive the promise, we have hope. And when you keep a hold of that hope – as you live by it – it can be scary because now that we believe it, we are compelled to live. Living by what we do not always see. We are trusting in what is unseen. There is some mystery there. We do know God; we are in relationship with God; but we are still called to trust God. If we knew it all, if we had control over it, it would not be called “trust.” Trust, which is really another way of saying, “Just letting go of the control that we never had in the first place.”

Trust in God. Trust by yielding your problems so that we can receive God’s Promises. This is how those who are in relationship with God will live. The alternative is to follow the myth that you have total control of your life, that you are in it for yourself, and to be like a Babylonian, which refuses to acknowledge that God is God.

When it really matters – when it is the hard times of life and we feel trapped by our circumstances – in that time – are we trusting in God? If we aren’t trusting God then but are trying to grab control ourselves, then how much does our faith really mean? Trusting is a way of life in the present; not a set of intentions for the future.

Surrender those problems; receive the Promise. This is how God calls us to live. This is how He pours out abundant life into our hearts. This is a gift. This is receiving life by faith. Amen.

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