

"Habakkuk"
Rolf Jacobson

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Habakkuk

For those of you who've never had the pleasure of familiarizing yourself with this beautiful book—or for whom it was very long ago—a few words about the prophet and the book that bears his name. Habakkuk was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah—living shortly before the twin catastrophes of 597 and 587, during which the kingdom of Judah was destroyed at the hand of Babylon, Jerusalem and its Temple were thrown down, and much of the population was either deported to Babylon or fled in any direction that seemed beyond Babylon's evil will. We know nothing about the prophet other than what his words tell us—the book gives us is no biographical about the man, not even his father's name or a hometown. It simply launches into his words, which are actually not a prophetic message to God's people, but a prayer to God:

The prayer that the prophet prays is as explicitly political as any prayer that any preacher has ever prayed.

Scene I

Refer to the bulletin with me and follow the prophet's logic. First, in the finest tradition of psalms of lament, he accuses God of not listening or answering legitimate prayers for help:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

Then, in the fine company of his prophetic contemporary Jeremiah, Habakkuk complains about his call:

Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

Why indeed? Why does the Word of God teach instruct us in the ways of God's justice, with the result that we become deeply aware of the injustice around us, but we are given no effective power to change anything around us. Do you ever feel that way church? Do you ever feel that through the Word, God has given you the eyes to see injustice, but you look and see no change, so at times you're like, "Hey God, what are these eyes for? I'm gonna poke them out with a plastic fork if I don't see some positive change, you got that Lord?" You ever feel like that church. Amen?

And then the prophet gets down to the core of his complaint against God. He says:

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore justice comes forth perverted.

I want to draw your attention to three things. First, I should have caught a translation problem earlier, but as I prepared for today, I caught what I believe is a better reading. The NRSV has the prophet saying, with his God-given prophetic eyes he sees, "Destruction and violence right before me." So far so

good. But the next phrase is better translated as “Lawsuits and judgments therefore arise.” The point is that yes, there are destruction and violence,” and the result is that in the legal system, “lawsuits and judgments arise.” So far so good, are you with me?

Ok then the prophet bases is next four lines on a play on words. In Hebrew, the term *mišpat* can mean either “justice” or “judgment” or “a specific law.” Three things. The prophets play on that semantic range by saying, “lawsuits and judgments arise, but the law is slack.” The law is no damn good. It’s like a wet noodle. Trying to sweep away injustice by passing a law and having a legal system is like attaching a broom to a rope. Can you imagine trying to push sweep a parking lot full of leaves and gravel with push broom built of a broom head and a rope?

That is what the relationship between the theoretical law and actual justice is. Because the link between the theoretical law and actual justice is—wait for it—the human will. And the human will is both free—so that human beings may choose evil over good. And the human will is also bound—so that even human beings who want to choose good over evil, won’t do so, because human knowing is socially constructed.

All of which—if you will permit me to be predictably Lutheran for a moment on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation—is why Luther wrote what I take to be his single most brilliant sentence: “The Law says do this, and it is never done.” The law says do this, and it is never done. Why is the law never done? A. Because there is always one more thing to do. And B. Because we never actually do it correctly. Even when we try to get the law right, we are fallible and we are finite.

And then, please pay attention with me to the text, the prophet complains, therefore “justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment [justice] comes forth perverted.” Notice the play on words. “Justice never prevails” and “justice comes forth perverted.” Why. God, *mišpat* never prevails because the wicked surround the righteous and therefore *mišpat* comes forth perverted.

What Habakkuk was saying is that there are two systems. For first system for all of us and second system for those in power. And this two-system reality pervades all of society. In the legal courts, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In the education system, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In the military system, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In the markets where goods are bought and exchanged, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In the healthcare system, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest.

And it’s this way all over the world—whatever the political and economic system, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In Venezuela, where full out socialism is destroying the country, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In North Korea, where a communist monarchy is in place, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. In South Sudan, in Syria, in Somalia, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest. And in the Western democracies and the United States, there is one system for those in power and a second system for the rest.

[If there is time, pause here to talk about the views of justice on the right and on the left.]

Scene II

Which brings us to scene two in our drama. In this scene, God responds to the prophet. And—spoiler alert—neither Habakkuk or you are going to like God’s answer:

Look at the nations, and see!
Be astonished! Be astounded!
For a work is being done in your days
that you would not believe if you were told.
For I am rousing the Chaldeans,
that fierce and impetuous nation,

who march through the breadth of the earth
to seize dwellings not their own.
Dread and fearsome are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. (1:2-7)

The Chaldeans are the Babylonians. God says to Habakkuk. "Okay little prophet man, you say two things. Number one, you want injustice to be punished. Number two, the problem with the law is that it isn't self-enforcing. People can disobey it. So here is your answer. I am sending the Babylonian Army and they are going to drop the ever-living smack on your unjust, non law-abiding nation." And here is the key line in God's response; "Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity come proceed from themselves." Or, more colloquially, "their justice doesn't need the human will, they enforce their justice themselves." Instead of a rope, they have a rod of iron attached to their broom, and they are going to sweep everything away.

So to be clear. Habakkuk says, "God, do something about the injustice in your people." God says, "OK, here comes Babylon."

Scene III

Which brings us to scene three of today's sermon, in which Habakkuk says to God, "Wait, wait don't kill me." That's actually the name, by the way, of Habakkuk's NPR radio program, Wait, Wait, Don't Kill Me. Here's the word's he used:

Are you not from of old,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
You shall not die.
O LORD, you have marked them for judgment;
and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment.
Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they? (1:12-13)
.....
I will stand at my watch post,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Habakkuk's response is a renewal of the lament that he had begun at the start of chapter 1. Here, he says to God, "Look, you are eternal and a hundred years of punishment don't mean much to you, but for us, its kind of a big deal." And then the prophet said to God, "I will await further instructions. I will stand at my watch post and wait."

And then, like the Psalmist of Psalm 130, who waits for God more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

Scene IV

In scene four, we find the Lord's answer:

Then the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may proclaim it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;

it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith. (2:1-4)
.....
I wait quietly for the day of calamity
to come upon the people who attack us.

This passage is, of course, the most famous verse in Habakkuk, because Paul cites it in Romans as he attempts to make sense out of both scripture on the one hand and the event of Jesus Christ on the other. But let's leave consideration of Paul's brilliant use of this verse for another day.

Because our goal is to hear the message of the book of Habakkuk in light of the theme of preaching and politics, let's instead think about what the book of Habakkuk's message first for its ancient context and then for today.

In its ancient context, the prophet clearly meant for the audience of the book to understand the message as this:

God is both just and faithful. God is both just and faithful. Because God is just, God is outraged by the evil and injustice in society—especially in the society of God's own people. But because God is also faithful, God will act. God is a genuine and real agent in the world. God gets things done. God will act. That is the promise that God gave to Habakkuk. "There is a vision for the appointed time. . . It speaks to the "end" and it does not lie."

God is at work in the world. God is, in the words of my beloved teacher Don Juel, loose in the world. In the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, God is loose, at work in the world. And although there are other agents at work to defy the creative and life-giving work of the Creator, God will overcome.

It may not look like it. At times, it surely seems that we look around and see nothing but injustice and evil. But God is at work. There is a vision for the appointed time. It will come. And until it comes, the just will live by faith.

That is, God's justified people will have the kind of faith that clings to the promise of the coming vision of God, and in the meantime—in the meantime—will have faith.

One last question—what does that faith look like?

To answer that question—what does the faith of God's justified people look like as we trust in God and wait for God in a world where there are two systems and there is injustice everywhere.

To answer that question, we must turn to the end of the book of Habakkuk—to its last few verses.

Scene V

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. (3:17-19)

Notice the absolutely countercultural faith of the just.

- God's justified people praise God in thanksgiving and exultation, when the fig tree bears no fruit.
- God's justified people praise God where there is no fruit on the olive vine.
- God's justified people praise God when the barley and wheat fields bear no grain.
- God's justified people praise God when there are no sheep in the sheepfold and there are no cattle in the pasture.
- When it seems that there is absolutely nothing—when God's justice and God's abundance both seem depleted, God's justified people praise God with joy and exultation because we live by faith.

And we make no sense to the world, my friends. The world out there looks at us as we live by faith in a God we cannot see, as we live by faith in a world that at times looks as if no God is active in the world, as we praise God and give thanks when we have nothing—the world out there looks at us like a certain Grinch looked at the Whos in Whoville who gave thanks even when all of the packages, boxes and bags had been stolen.

Thanksgiving and praise and joy are what the life of faith in the Triune God look like, dear friends. Because there is more power in thanksgiving, praise and joy than the world can possibly imagine.

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