

Sermon – October 2, 2022

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Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

The prophet they called Habakkuk didn't shy away from calling things like he saw them. Even to God's face.

Think about that. An Old Testament prophet—called personally by God, blessed with insight beyond that of normal humans, with a direct line to the Almighty—*questioning* his God. Calling *out* God, in fact.

But... through his *conversations* with God, even world-weary Habakkuk is able to come to place that it's possible for *all* of us to find... a *peace* that could change *everything* for us, *even* in the face of a world rife with violence, destruction, persecution, and injustice. **See, Habbakuk is an example of someone living in a world very much like our own, who found a way to lay his pain and his fears in God's hands, and *trust* God—unconditionally—to see him through. The ability to put that kind of *trust* in God... I think that's something we should all be seeking.**

But *how* do we put our trust in God... when it seems like God isn't paying attention?

Habakkuk begins his lament with this prayer: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?"

Our modern English translation hides it behind the words "O Lord," but here Habakkuk actually uses God's *first name*. It's like when my parents were angry with me as a kid and they'd shout from across the house "Daniel Ethan!"

Like, "Explain yourself!"

We know roughly *when* Habakkuk was active as a prophet: it was in a time roughly six hundred years before the birth of Christ, when Israelite society was falling apart and the region was constantly shaken by warring and conquering empires.

"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 judgment comes forth perverted."

At thirty-three years old, I have not *lived* in a world where people *weren't* saying the very *same* things about the *present*, every day.

In *his* day, Habakkuk tried to take God to task. "I witness suffering, violence, wrongdoing, injustice, oppression, hypocrisy, and You do *nothing*."

"What *good* are You, God?"

And God replies... “You’re not wrong. Bad things are happening, and they’re gonna *keep* happening, and I’m not gonna stop them all. And *some* of it’s going to be just, because some of it you messed-up humans *deserve*... and some of it’s going to be wildly unfair.”

So of course Habakkuk doubles down. He addresses God much in the same way that many of us have over the last couple of years. “O Lord,” he says, “why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?”

We ask it all the time. Pastor Eric asked it in his sermon last week: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” If God is love—if God’s love is for us—then why does God let us suffer? And what *good* is a god if that God won’t protect us from all evil? Why *should* we put our trust in that God?

It’s at moments like this that I have to remind myself of the grand paradox that is God. We talk about “*geologic* time,” where on the scale of how long *Earth* has been around, *humanity* has only been here for the blink of an eye—let alone human *civilization*.

And Earth is a young planet in a young solar system in the corner of a young galaxy *full* of wonder and mystery. In the face of God, time *itself* is young. In that sense, to God even a *decade* of suffering lasts shorter than the space between two heartbeats.

And *yet*, the paradox of God revealed through the life and death of Jesus *Christ* is that every single *moment* of suffering is felt by God just as acutely as it is felt by *us*. We mortal, time-locked humans. When *we* hurt, God hurts. When we *cry*, God cries.

And when we laugh, God laughs with us.

These two opposing realities of God showcase two *promises* of God.

The promise of Christ—God living *as* us, walking *with* us—is that God will *always* be with us, there to hold our hand when we are alone, to put an arm around us when we are weak, and to hold us when we weep. To give us strength, to give us consolation, and to offer us peace.

And the promise of big, capital *G* God is that our suffering *will* end. That one day—whether it’s tomorrow or next week or fifty years from now; whether it’s in *this* life or the *next*—one day our suffering will be but a breath of memory on a mirror, fading into nothing. That all this shall pass, that even death itself shall be defeated, and in a blink of an eye we will be made whole.

God is right here with us in the here-and-now... *and* God is with us in the Geologic... *capital G*.

Now that *promise* of deliverance isn't *always* a comfort to those suffering. How many times have any of us had to comfort a crying child by telling them, "It's okay, it will be over soon." Maybe we're trying to pull out a splinter, or maybe their first boyfriend dumped them for the cheerleading captain... Our best comfort is "This will pass. It gets better." And yet, as true as it *is*, that simple fact doesn't always help.

In the same way, in the depths of our most tragic suffering, God is *there* whispering in our hearts, "This too shall pass. I promise you freedom, justice, and fullness of life. It won't be long." But we're human beings. Most of us don't even live to be a hundred. Our concept of the future is limited by our experience of the present. And a God that can't operate on *our* terms is no *good* to *us*. It's why so many who suffer real *tragedies* in their lives turn away from God or from the Church, when really the best comfort to them would be a *deeper* relationship with the God they feel has abandoned them.

It's a hell of a paradox. And one that Habakkuk knew well.

But Habakkuk was trying. As a prophet, he *knew* God. In a way that few others did. And he *wanted* to put his trust in God. Totally and completely, without doubt or despair. And so he tried to be patient. He tried to wait for the answer to his prayers: the divine response that would end the suffering he witnessed all around him—because he knew deep down the undeniable truth, that God *loves* God's children.

He kept that faith just as long as he could, and maybe a little longer... until *finally* God gave him a *vision*. God gave him hope.

God showed Habakkuk that one day justice *would* rain down. That light *would* outshine the darkness. That one day relief *will* come... that suffering will end and righteousness will endure, no matter how bad it gets, and no matter how final the final defeat may be. God showed Habakkuk that God's promise *will* be fulfilled, once and for all, before another cosmic heartbeat has passed.

Habakkuk lived in a terrible time. A time when only the unjust found any relief, and even *then* it was an empty, dirty relief that didn't satisfy. Whole generations lived and died knowing nothing but fruitless struggle.

Many of us sitting here in these pews know a bit about what that's like. A number of us here *today* are suffering a life that knows no relief. A life where God is *not* interceding and *fixing* all of our unfixable problems.

What good is that God? How could we *trust* that God?

To me... I think having faith in God and having faith in people are two completely different things.

Loving *people* is often conditional. We give love, and trust, and faith to others, but when things go wrong we take it away. For good reasons as well as the bad.

But the fact that God loves *us* is *un*-conditional.

That fact is revealed to us in the *life* and *sacrifice* of Jesus... and it's revealed to us every day, *even* in the depths of our suffering... because if we *open our hearts* to the *possibility* that God is right there with us, holding our hand with a tearful smile... we *feel* the presence of God. It's *real*. It doesn't always make the pain go away... but it gives us something that wasn't there before.

And no matter what we've done wrong, no matter how we've failed God or one another or ourselves, if we open our hearts to it it's *right there*! Just waiting for us to *believe* in it... to believe in the saving love of Christ. To reach out and *grasp* it.

The love of God just *is*. It's a universal constant that predates gravity. God loves you, and that *means something*.

And because God loves us unconditionally, our *faith* in God should be unconditional *too*.

But that's *hard*. We don't have any example of that to draw from in our human lives. "Unconditional faith." Unconditional *trust*. And because of that it's so easy to fall short.

When things are going well, we *love* God. We praise God. We offer prayers of thanksgiving and we walk in Jesus' footsteps and we put "hashtag Blessed" in our Tweets.

When things are going *poorly*... we tolerate God.

And when things get worse, we distrust God.

And when that final straw snaps... some of us abandon God.

But what that is is a *human* relationship. And for the record, oftentimes it's a *healthy* human relationship. It's not *safe* to put our trust in a human who has proven unreliable or treacherous. Sometimes the best thing you can do is cut ties with a toxic person in your life, and God would applaud you for it. Because God doesn't want you to suffer.

But applying that same logic to a relationship with *God* is comparing apples to oranges.

God's not an abusive parent who beats you to relieve their feelings of inadequacy. God's not a lover who leaves you because you aren't satisfying them. God's not a cowardly friend who turns on you to save their own skin.

Our faith in *others* can be breakable. And at times it *should* be. But *God's* a different animal entirely, and our *faith* in God should reflect that.

Just because there are times in our lives when we see what Habakkuk saw—that there are moments when God *isn't* swooping in to *fix* the problems we see with a wave of a

cosmic hand—that doesn't mean God or faith is *useless*. It doesn't mean we should abandon all hope, and abandon God, because we think God has "*proven* to be unreliable."

God is the most reliable thing there is. God *never* abandons us. Each year Christ is born anew in our lives, and each *moment* Christ's standing beside us with an open hand, waiting for us to grasp it and let the Holy Spirit fill our hearts.

And God promises us that even the most everlasting suffering we experience will disappear like fog on glass. That one day very soon our pain will be *lost* in the rear-view mirror. That's a promise you can trust... completely, and unconditionally.

"God's time isn't our time." Those words provide so *little* comfort sometimes. But they're true, and they can give us *something* to believe in. To offer us comfort while we wait. While we wait in hope for what has been *promised*.

And it's not really *hope* anymore when the outcome is *assured*.

It's faith.

Thanks be to God.