

Habakkuk Spiritual Talk - 9.10.23

Habakkuk.

The 5th and 2nd-to-last prophet we'll encounter in the series.

He's a unique prophet in a number of ways,
including the fact that his name is the hardest one to spell
or remember how to pronounce.

Have people turn to a neighbor and talk about a time someone goofed up their name or they had an embarrassing moment around someone else's name.

Early on in this current teaching series on the Minor Prophets,
we talked about what prophecy actually is.

We reflected together on the fact that the prophets weren't so much
about telling the future.

The biblical prophets did not primarily
predict the future or pronounce sort of spiritual riddles
or mysterious sayings that required decoding.

I think in popular imagination
prophecies tend to be like that -

I think of the famous one in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost,
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring,
Renewed shall be the blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be King.

It's kind of a riddle, right?

It's a prophecy, but it's shrouded in mystery.

And a lot of people think like that about the Bible.

You'll see sensational stuff like the History channel's recent show titled, "Bible Secrets Revealed: Mysterious Prophecies."

But that's really a misunderstanding of biblical prophecy. The prophets' Spirit-inspired intention in communicating was so that the people would hear and understand, that people would be strengthened, encouraged, instructed, or corrected by God through their words.

Maybe you've seen the recent meme going around regarding yet another popular sensationalized belief, that somehow there's all kinds of stuff that "Scientists don't want you to know." The meme is like, "Have you even ever met a scientist? Like, if you know any real scientists you they're often only too ready to talk in depth about their niche and peculiar area of study. They want you to know! They really do!"

And it's the same with the biblical prophets. Their intent is to communicate, not to obscure.

But the kinds of communication the prophets engage in do vary. Most often they receive a word from God and proclaim a sort of prophetic oracle to the people. They are God's mouthpiece, speaking the word of the Lord for the sake of the hearers.

Sometimes the prophets would engage in prophetic actions rather than words, like when Hosea married an unfaithful spouse

as a picture of God's relationship with Israel,
or when Ezekiel lay on his left side for over a year
as a sign-act making visible the gravity of the people's sin.

So the prophets spoke oracles, they often spoke in poetry,
they performed strange sign acts,
and their messages spanned the whole gamut
from judgment to tender compassion.

But Habakkuk is unique among the prophets.

Rather than proclaiming an oracle from God to the people,
Habakkuk begins by proclaiming a complaint,
on behalf of the people, to God.

Let's read from the beginning of the book,
starting at verse 2:

Habakkuk 1:2-4 (NIV)

²How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

How long, O Lord??

This anguished cry, if read out of context,
would seem to spring right from the Psalms,
that collection of poems from worshiping hearts
that are open and vulnerable before God.

In fact, hear these words from Psalm 13:

¹ How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Habakkuk begins his short little prophecy
with the honest cry of a perplexed and suffering lover of God.
He sees injustice, wrongdoing,
destruction and violence all around,
and God doesn't seem to be doing anything about it.
In fact, the scales seem to be tipped in favor of wickedness -
Habakkuk complains that justice *never* prevails,
and that the righteous are hemmed in by the wicked.

So why is the book of Habakkuk included among the prophets,
and not simply one of the Psalms or part of the wisdom literature of the Bible,
like Ecclesiastes or Job?

Well, Habakkuk's outcry is extraordinary and prophetic
because he expects God to answer him,
and God does indeed answer.

And it is also prophetic in the sense that
this dialogue between Habakkuk and God
deals with a critical historical moment
and the fate of God's people within it.

Over the past few weeks as we read Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah,

all of these prophets we grappling with the crises surrounding the Assyrian empire's take-over of the land of Israel and Judah.

But Habakkuk comes later in Judah's history, when the Assyrian empire has crumbled, and Babylon is now ascending.

Habakkuk is struggling to make sense both of the rampant wickedness he sees within Judah itself, among the very people of God, and then the terror and evil he sees looming on the horizon in the form of Babylon, this overpowering force against which there was no practical hope.

After Habakkuk issues his initial complaint, accusing God of standing passively by as wickedness rules the earth, as threats mount and as faithful people are constantly denied justice, he says at the beginning of chapter 2,

Habakkuk 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...

When we were discussing this passage in teaching team, Jessi, who is our Ministry Resident here at Threads this year as she prepares to be ordained for Navy Chaplaincy, Jessi commented that this is a very military scene. The prophet is standing watch, waiting for orders.

Even though Habakkuk is challenging God, coming at God with fighting words, accusing God of refusing to listen

as injustice goes screaming unchecked across the face of the earth,
even so, he sees himself as God's subordinate.
Even in his anguish and his challenge to God,
he waits for God Most High to answer.
Habakkuk seems to trust God enough
both to feel safe in lodging his complain,
and in the expectation of an answer
and even marching orders.

And he was not disappointed,
God did answer him.
In the next 2 verses we read:

Habakkuk 2:2-3

²Then the Lord replied:

“Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.

³For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come
and will not delay.

⁴“See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness...

That last line is incredibly important,
and it is picked up several times by the New Testament authors.

The righteous person will live by their faithfulness.

In this context, the righteous person is the one who lives *according to* their relationship with God. Even when God seems remote, even when God's ways seem perplexing and unjust, the righteous person keeps turning back to God, even if sometimes only in complaint and challenge.

And the righteous live by their faithfulness. When the NT authors pick this up, they say, "The righteous will live by faith." What does that mean?

Well, the author of the letter to the Hebrews riffs on this theme for a couple minutes. So let's look at what they have to say.

Hebrews 10:32-38

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For,

"In just a little while,
he who is coming will come
and will not delay."

³⁸ And,

"But my righteous one will live by faith."

Within the wider American Evangelical culture and mind,
there has been a tremendous perversion
of this idea of “living by faith.”

This came into play during the pandemic, right,
when some Christians who opposed masking mandates
made “faith over fear” their rallying cry.

Now, there are discussions we can have about the actual effectiveness of
masking and all of that.

But for those who participated in masking as a good-faith effort
to cooperate with public health initiatives to try to save lives,
these Christian anti-maskers’ accusation is that
those who wore masks were succumbing to fear and rejecting faith.

And yet, Covid killed indiscriminately, right?

It doesn’t matter how much faith someone had.

Many many Christians died of Covid.

You’ve all heard the phrase “preaching to the choir,”
and of course that originated from the idea that the choir members
are often the most faithful churchgoers of all.

And in fact, Covid spread aggressively in early days
among choirs because the virus-laden droplets spread farther through singing,
and sometimes wiped out a huge proportion of a single choir.

Faithful people suffer and die
at exactly the same rate as the unfaithful.

The author of Hebrews,
along with Habakkuk,
would assert that sometimes the faithful seem to suffer
even more than others.

So faith isn’t about belief as somehow a safeguard against disaster.
Faith is a bulwark, a stronghold, in the midst of whatever may come.
Faith says, come what may,
we trust in your goodness O God.
Even when we can’t see it,

even when the earth gives way
and the mountains fall into the depths of the sea,
even so,
we trust that the one whom our hearts love
will come and will not dealy.

Habakkuk chapter 2 closes with these words
that give me goosebumps every time I read them:

²⁰ The Lord is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.
Hab 2:20.

One day all injustice will cease.
At the word of God all bloodshed,
all destruction of animals and forests,
oceans and rivers,
families and communities -
all harms perpetrated against innocent people will end forever,
and woe to those who were not already anticipating God's holy final action
and working to propel their world in the direction of justice and peace.
One day the stunning holiness of God will be fully revealed
and if we could even glimpse the edge of it
all creation would fall silent,
flat on our faces before the glory and justice of God.

Habakkuk glimpses all of this
when God speaks,
and so the book ends with the prophet's own
renewed sense of awe toward God,
and trust in God's faithfulness.

Habakkuk 3:2

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*.

²Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.
Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.

Many of us can relate to Habakkuk's position here.
In the end, he trusts the sacred witness of those who have gone before;
he believes in the goodness of God
because of the stories handed down
from generation to generation
that tell of God's intervention,
God's care and concern,
God's nearness and intimate involvement with God's people.
Habakkuk has not personally experienced that.
All he has seen is the perversion of justice,
the ascendancy of the wicked,
the victimization of the righteous.

Many of us have witnessed or experienced
a lot of the hurt and harm the world dishes out.
And though we have experienced times of the Holy Spirit's presence,
though we have experienced comfort through God's love,
though we have been sustained and upheld
by the community of God's holy people,
we have not witnessed the miraculous interventions we have longed for.
Like Habakkuk, we take these things on faith:
I believe that Jesus touched the lepers and they were healed.
I believe that God raised Christ from the grave.
I believe that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead
and to make all things new.
It can be so difficult to live according to this faith

when all we can see is how evil and heartbreak proliferate.
It can be hard to hang onto faith when the evidence seems scarce.

And yet Habakkuk
finds himself in dialogue with the living God
as a result of his audacity in questioning God's justice.
And through this dialogue,
he is reminded of God's power,
God's faithfulness,
and God's assurance that evil will not keep the upper hand.
This short prophetic book ends with Habakkuk's profound declaration of faith.
He says:

Habakkuk 3:17-19

¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
¹⁹ The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.

When everything looks dark,
when our circumstances defy hope,
when suffering is bitter
and the future looks no better than the distressing present,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord.
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

For Habakkuk, this meant that Babylon would indeed brutally and overwhelmingly conquer Judah. His people would continue to suffer.

And yet Habakkuk was given a glimpse of what we are privileged to see with greater clarity through the lens of God's love made human in Christ. Habakkuk was sustained and upheld by the knowledge that Jesus made fully tangible in his life, death and resurrection:

God is not absent in our suffering.
God does not turn an unhearing ear to the cries of the oppressed.
God in Christ has entered fully into the mess and the suffering of this groaning old world,
and is already working healing, renewal and redemption through the Holy Spirit at work in the holy people of God.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part

says the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13,

¹⁰ but when completeness comes,
what is in part disappears.

¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror;
then we shall see face to face.

Now I know in part;
then I shall know fully,
even as I am fully known.

The righteous will live by faith.
But not forever.
We trust in what we cannot see,

or what see only as in a mirror,
but the day is coming when faith will turn to sight.
That's why Paul can state at the end of 1 Corinthians 13,

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest
of these is love.

A day is coming when all the suffering and injustice and disaster
that requires us to cry out in faith, like Habakkuk,

“I have heard of your fame,
I stand in awe of your deeds;
renew them in our day”;

Will fade away in the blazing glory
of the love of Christ
fully revealed,
in the experience of a creation fully healed,
in the knowledge of justice and mercy
somehow, in a way only God can achieve,
both fully executed upon the earth.

It is in the hope of that day that we can say with Habakkuk,
no matter our circumstances,

¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
¹⁹ The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.

