

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 Habakkuk
November 3, 2019

The prophecy of Habakkuk begins with a series of questions that though they are associated with specific historical events, speak more generally, questions appropriate for every time and place:

“How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence,’ but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?

And then a couple of statements:

Destruction and violence are before me, *there is strife, conflict abounds.*

Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice is perverted.”

This set of questions sounds like the good old question, “why do bad things happen to good people?” It is relevant to our own times. And we can add that there are two sides, and that both sides see the other as the culprit, the ones guilty of violence and injustice and wrong, so much that when we come to church to ask Habakkuk’s questions, some of us are thinking that one side is wrong and the other in need of divine help, and others are thinking the other side is wrong and the one in need of help.

There is strife, conflict abounds.

Habakkuk meant to be speaking to the political situation of his own time as well as the larger religious and cultural circumstances, and we can do the same. But these questions are also relevant also to our personal lives, our families, even sometimes we find strife and division in our own souls.

Habakkuk

Like the other prophets in the Old Testament, Habakkuk served in trying times. Though nothing is known about him, his work seems to be associated with the time shortly before the arrival of the Babylonians, who would, of course, show up to conquer the Kingdom of Judah and carry the leading citizens into exile.

I refer to this period as the, “Babylonian Crisis,” and much of the Bible was written during this or shortly after this time. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel were active. There are no words sufficient to describe how devastating it was for the people of Judah. One might refer to the more recent American Civil War, or WWI or WWII, as parallel examples, illustrating the violence in human affairs, and as reminders that history often repeats itself.

Very often people tend to see the world in terms of the recent past. Our time is like that. WWII is at the center of the world’s attention. We live in the “post-war” period. Not knowing what is coming, everything is

named in terms of what it comes after. So we have terms like, “post-denominational, post-modern, post-Christian, post-God,” even.

But what is the next great crisis? I think we all feel the stress of it, even though we are not sure what it will be. Some say it will be the economy, another depression; others say an environmental catastrophe, still others see WWII on the horizon. Maybe all three.

Habakkuk spoke of the Babylonian invasion before it happened and his word was to “keep the faith.”

Calvinism?

Now there was no such thing as the Calvinist notion of the Providence of God when the Chaldeans, as the Babylonians were called, came conquering on the scene of history in about 600 BCE. As a matter of fact, it is works like Isaiah and Habakkuk provide the theological foundation for that doctrine.

The prophet here says that the Babylonians were God’s instrument to punish Judah for its sins, and that not only was the time for their arrival appointed, but also the time of their departure. Habakkuk states this clearly in the text, and says to wait for the appointed day.

He says if it takes a long time to come, or what seems like a long time, to wait, for it will surely come. He says that it is all part of a great divine plan for the salvation of the Judean people. In Christianity, it has been

extended to refer to the coming redemption of the world.

What to do?

The secondary question is, “what shall we do while we wait?” And not just while we wait for the next crisis, but also when it comes, while we wait for it to end? What does it mean to be faithful in these circumstances?

The first thing to say is that we should not be surprised when catastrophe comes, nor should we panic. When the worst happens, we can be assured that God has things well in hand. Being able to work through what psychologists call the, “stages of grief,” is important. The goal is to accept and adjust to a new normal, which can be traumatic and threaten our sense of security.

The second thing to say is that being faithful means to be good. The temptation is to panic, or become discouraged, maybe even desperately so; to turn to the list of vices to which people are so prone to do; anger, malice, hatred, jealousy, rage, selfishness and greed and self-indulgence, and fear, you know the drill. But we are called by our faith not to give in to all that.

The third thing to say is that being good, so obviously compels us to try the other list, the list of virtues; love, joy and peace, that kind of thing; to be forgiving and gracious, hospitable, kind, compassionate. We must

conclude that it is more important to stress these virtues over the idea of purity, because the idea of purity is dishonest and it results in judgmentalism, which is cynical, and skeptical, involving a panic that can not be thought of as faithful.

And finally, the prophets not only told the truth about their circumstances and demanded that people accept them and be good while they wait for things to get better, but they encouraged people to thrive in them. God ahead and take care of your daily needs, look for ways to build families and communities, to work in the circumstances for the better.

For us this means to be good citizens and good neighbors, and in these cynical times it means to vote, even in the off year elections, to help our communities to become stronger and healthier, to mind our physical and psychological health and to be accepting and forgiving of others as they mind theirs. We are to seek friendship with other people, even those different from us, even those we perceive as enemies.

Habakkuk is not like Jeremiah who was more specific about such things, but he does put it this way in the end:

“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, and though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,

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

The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go to the heights.”

No matter what happens with the political situation, the next election and all that, and no matter what happens with the economy or the environment, and no matter what happens in our personal lives or the life of our church, we will await the appointed time; if it lingers, we will wait, and live by faith so that when the appointed time comes, with love and grace in our hearts, we too will be enabled to *go to the heights*.

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