

“Tucked Away in the Bible: VI - Habakkuk”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
October 18, 2009

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4

Well, I did it! I finally did it! It's the next to the last week in the “Tucked Away in the Bible” sermon series, and I finally stumped everybody! Nobody I talked to in the past week could tell me anything about Habakkuk - the main character in this morning's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures. Not a soul! I even asked a retired priest friend of mine, and not only could he not tell me anything specific about Habakkuk, when I said his name he realized he'd been mispronouncing it his whole career - calling him Habacook!

So fear not! If you've never heard of Habakkuk, or just don't know anything about him, you're in good company. He truly is tucked away in the Bible - way far into the Hebrew scriptures, right after Nahum and right before Zephaniah (two others I won't ask you about!)

So, as I've done in previous sermons in this series, let me tell you a little bit about Habakkuk, a little background information that will help set the stage for what's to come. Habakkuk was a prophet about the same time as Jeremiah. His writing is from around 605 BC. He lived in Judah, at a time when Judah was under siege. Judah's enemies were all around, and Judah's very existence was under constant threat. They, who were God's chosen people, were being treated horribly, suffering terribly, and were constantly fearful that they would be overrun.

So Habakkuk spoke on their behalf. Now, interestingly, most prophets that we encounter in the Bible speak to the people on God's behalf. In this case, it's reversed. Habakkuk speaks to God on behalf of the people of Judah. You heard his questions and complaints: “God, how long will you not help us? How long do we have to cry to you? Look God, we're suffering, and the evil ones are thriving! How long will you let this go on?”

Habakkuk rails against God, throwing question after question in God's direction. Why? How? What? When?

Then God answers, and it's not a good answer, or at least not what Habakkuk wants to hear. Evil will come, enemy nations will threaten Judah, but then, God says, wait, all will eventually be well. Wait, in the end all will be well.

Of course, there are a lot more details to the story, but those are the basic facts of it. And though it is a relatively little book, and it is really tucked away in the Bible, I think it has a mighty message for us today. Because I suspect many people feel a little bit like Habakkuk and Judah these days. Times are tough, suffering is known by many, enemies/creditors/opponents/diseases swarm, life is hard. Many people are going through seasons of hardship right now - some we know about, others are being suffered through silently. And whether or not, you're going through one of those times right now, it doesn't really matter, because at one time or another in your life, you will. It's part of being human.

So let's see what we can learn from Habakkuk for when we do go through those dry and difficult seasons in life.

The first thing is that it's okay to question God, to talk back to God, to challenge God. The scriptures are full of accounts of people doing just that - in fact, the Psalms are chocked full of just that. It is okay to question God. It doesn't mean you don't have faith!

One writer put it beautifully when he said, "Questions (like these from Habakkuk), do not come from doubt, they come from faith. We can only ask why God does not run the world better if we are already convinced that He, indeed, does run the world!" (On-line, Dr. Bill Long)

He continues, "Questions are as powerful an expression of faith in God as any testimony! The questions may be the highest form of praise, because the questions are willing to take life under God seriously."

Far too often, we berate ourselves for even thinking about questioning God, or even berate others, because we've thought it means we lack faith. Just the opposite - you can't question someone if you don't believe he or she has something to do with that with which you're wrestling!

Friends, God can take it! Ask the questions, share the feelings of your heart and soul. That's the kind of relationship - open and honest - that God desires to have with us. That's the kind of relationship Habakkuk had with God. He questioned him in faith and with faith, and with brutal and total honesty.

So that's the first thing we can learn from Habakkuk. Secondly, we can learn as Habakkuk did, that even in tough times, even while questioning and going back and forth with God, we need to trust that, in the end, it will be okay, God can be trusted.

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, ultimately Habakkuk believed

that Judah would be okay, that God would take care of them. So in the meantime he waited with that trust.

In many ways, that should be easier for us to do, because Habakkuk didn't have the benefit of knowing Jesus and His story. We know how God made good, life-changing good come out of something so evil. We know how, in spite of the fact that evil appears to have the final word when Jesus was crucified, God brought life-changing good out of it in the resurrection. So, we, of all people, as followers of Jesus Christ, ought to always trust that in God it will be okay, all will be well, because we've seen it!

You know, the great professor and preacher Tony Campolo, once preached what has since become an incredibly famous sermon. He called it, "It's Friday, But Sunday's Coming." Some of you may have heard it or read it. It's all about the time after the crucifixion. In the sermon, Tony talks about hearing the pastor of the African-American church he attends in Philadelphia talk about that time. It went something like this:

"It's Friday, but Sunday's coming.

It was Friday, and my Jesus is dead on a tree. But that's Friday, and Sunday's coming.

Friday, Mary's crying her eyes out, the disciples are running in every direction like sheep without a shepherd. But that's Friday and Sunday's coming.

Friday, some are looking at the world and saying, 'As things have been, so they shall be. You can't change nothing in this world!'

But they didn't know that it was only Friday, and Sunday's coming.

Friday, them forces that oppress the poor and keep people down, them forces that destroy people, the forces in control now, them forces that are gonna rule, they don't know it's only Friday, but Sunday's coming.

Friday, people are saying, 'Darkness is gonna rule the world, sadness is gonna be everywhere,' but they don't know it's only Friday, but Sunday's coming.

Even though this world is rotten, as it is right now, we know it's only Friday, but Sunday's coming!" (On-line, Dr. Tony Campolo)

As children of God, and faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we know that even though sometimes it feels like Good Friday, Sunday's coming! Sunday always comes! Knowing that can carry us through the dry and difficult times.

The third thing Habakkuk helps us with is, learning how to wait through the tough times. God tells Habakkuk to keep the vision before the people so that they

might wait in faith.

You know, there are really three ways to wait. One is to wait in anger. Things aren't going well, times are tough, nothing is as it should be - so I'll be angry! You've seen people deal with tough times like that. They are angry, hostile, rebellious. And they usually have no trouble telling everybody how miserable they are.

Another way is to wait with resignation. "Oh well, what will be will be. Can't do anything about it." Resignation often turns to cynicism, and it generally leads to a lackluster, flat life.

But Habakkuk invites us to a third way of waiting - waiting with expectancy and anticipation - waiting knowing that God will act, and waiting expectantly to see how God will act. Waiting with expectancy and anticipation is the way of faithful people, it's how we are called to live.

Finally, after first, teaching us that it's okay to question or challenge God; secondly, that we're called to trust in God no matter what the circumstances of life; thirdly, that as we go through the dry and difficult seasons we are called to wait on God with expectancy and anticipation, Habakkuk invites us, I think, to not be passive observants, but active participants in God's work. In other words, to do our part.

While we wait on God, we work with God. Habakkuk went away from his conversation with God to do as God asked - to keep His vision in front of the people and live His vision in his own way. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "In a gentle way, you can shake the world." He also said, "You must be the change you want to see in the world." (On-line, Dr. Bill Long)

The answer to the injustice in Habakkuk's world was faithful living, and so he did just that. He did what he could do in his own little corner of the world. And that's what we can do. We can't solve all the world's problems, we can't make the bad things go away, we can't end the dry, difficult seasons, but we can live fully and faithfully right where we are. We can do what we can do in our own little corner of the world - who knows what God will do with our faithfulness?

I read an article a few months ago in Guideposts magazine about a group of West-African women, from Liberia. They had traveled to Ghana where talks were being held in an attempt to bring peace to the upheaval in Liberia. They were part of a group known as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. The group had been formed because women were tired of being terrorized and tired of seeing their children being conscripted for service. They were tired of being afraid all the time.

So they got together and tried to do something about the evil running rampant in their land.

So they went to the site of the peace talks which were held in a lavish hotel. The men gathered in opulent ballrooms to try to hash out their differences, but day after day after day, nothing happened. A woman named Leymah who told this story, began to feel a little like Habakkuk. This is what she wrote:

“I sat in front of the computer feeling sick. How could I have been so wrong about all of this? I suddenly saw how foolish I had been to think that a handful of women could stop a civil war by praying, wearing white T-shirts, singing songs and holding signs. I’d actually believed those passages in the Bible about the last being first, blessed are the meek.”

“You fooled me, God, I thought bitterly.”

Then, she clicked onto a website and discovered that a bomb had gone off and hit the US Embassy in Liberia, and something clicked inside of her. She sent out word and gathered as many women in their white T-shirts as she could, and they marched themselves over to the hotel where the peace talks were taking place, and they all plopped down in the hallway right outside the meeting room, and there they sat, totally blocking everything.

Soon the people behind the doors got word of what was happening outside, and they threatened to arrest all of the women for obstructing justice. When the women heard that, they fired back, “What justice? When will you men really talk peace?” It ended up being a showdown.

Leymah’s words again: “The men did return to the negotiating table. We women did finally unblock the corridor. And two weeks later, those warlords signed a comprehensive peace treaty that pushed Charles Taylor (the dictator) from power and established a transitional government with the promise of free elections two years later.”

Thinking back on that day, Leymah says, “I knew what strengthened me to storm that hotel corridor was not simply anger. It was faith - faith that I’d lost the moment I doubted that God really, truly is on the side of the weak.” (Guideposts, July 2009, “Prayer Warrior)

Like Habakkuk, Leymah did what she could while she waited on God, whatever she could, and so, my friends, should we. We are called to live in faithfulness as we wait on God, to do what we can where we can. Habakkuk wrote the vision and lived the vision until God’s vision came to pass.

Dry, difficult seasons come to all of us, but God is bigger than they are, and God will make things well, in God's time. The next time one comes along in your life, maybe you'll think of Habakkuk and lean on his teachings to carry you through.

If it happens that your dry, difficult season is right now, take heart. Though everything may look bleak, and troubles crowd in on every side, wait, for God is at work, and one day, all will be well. In the meantime, wait, trust, and do what you can where you are.

In just a moment, we're going to stand and sing together a lovely hymn called "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." If you are going through a time of trial right now, or if someone you know is hurting, I invite you to come to the rail and be in prayer. Talk to God, lay your burden down, and ask Him to help you or them in this time of waiting. Let us stand and sing together now.