



“Stories You Missed: Habakkuk’s Prayer”
Sermon by Rev. Christopher Chatelaine-Samsen
Habakkuk 3:1, 17-19a

SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

HABAKKUK 3:1, 17-19A

A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth.

*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;
[who] makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

How do you trust a good God in a broken world?

Maybe Habakkuk knows.

This past summer, we looked at eight stories in the Bible to make a sort of roadmap, eight signposts to mark the way between beginning and end, past and future, was, is,

and will be. They were eight stories that, told together, tell a cohesive narrative. God calls humanity to follow God, God provides through good times and bad, and our calling is to bless and care for the world in the hope of that time in which all things will be made new. It’s a good story, and as an overarching story of what it means to be a person in the world, I like it. I can hold on to it.

If only it were that uncomplicated, simple, and straightforward. I think the story holds true as a whole, when you zoom out, but the subplots get messy. The more we drill down, the more we look at the world in its particularity, the more we see that the story that moves towards God’s complete goodness and redemption is never a straight one. The side stories can be quite troubling.

The prophet Habakkuk was more than aware of this reality.

The prophet lived in a time during which he understood that a great calamity was coming. His perception of things in his time was that the people of Israel lived unjustly,

the powerful oppressing the weak, the system of justice rendering unjust results for those who most needed true justice. This, of course, is the cry and warning of most of the prophets, a familiar one. And like most of the prophets, Habakkuk proclaimed that a great consequence was coming for this error – in this case, the Chaldeans were coming to overthrow the people and leave them in ruin.

Like many prophets, there is no self-satisfied justification in the work for Habakkuk. He would just as well have it that this terrible calamity would not come. He pleads with God – his first words in the book are “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” He pleads for the people – yes, the people have sinned, we have been wrong – but take this devastating consequence away from us. May this terrible thing pass.

Regardless of what we think about belief in divine punishment, what we do know from history is that this calamity did come to pass, another step in the decline of Israel to exile, another step away from the glory days of how things had been. There were consequences for human error, and withholding those consequences is not always an option.

That idea has always resonated with me as I’ve read about what we often refer to as the judgments of God in the Hebrew Bible. For many, it seems that God is capricious and mean. The people didn’t live up to some standard written up in a tablet, or something like that, and so God will bring down fire from the heavens in order to punish the people. Hardly a loving God if we see it that way.

But the idea of consequences has always held some weight for me. Perhaps it’s a function of the way I grew up – to my parents’ great credit, the consequences of an action or inaction were always clear to me, and those consequences came to pass. Not as punishment, never meanly, but always to demonstrate the reality that there is a connection between the way one chooses to behave and what comes after. If you touch fire, you will get burned. If you act with malice, people will get hurt.

And so I’ve always chosen to read the “divine punishments” of Scripture through the lens of consequence. Habakkuk said that the Israelites were acting unjustly. They hurt the poor and marginalized. And so there are consequences, simple as that.

But what about forgiveness? Love? What about the stories of Jesus that are nothing like that? And in a world of great calamity, how do you maintain faith when the God of redemption, of second chances, of healing, simply seems to let us lie in the beds we have made for ourselves?

I have been wondering that very question this week.

On Thursday, I listened as the mayor of Yellowknife, Canada told NPR reporters that for the first time in history, her city was being evacuated due to wildfires. She said it had never happened before, never in her entire life of growing up and living in that city. And moreover, she said, more than a half-dozen communities around her were being evacuated for the first time.

And last week we mourned the devastation and tragedy in Lahaina, an unspeakable

event that only silence and tears can witness to.

And now I read that the first-ever tropical storm warning has been issued for Los Angeles. The last time a tropical storm hit LA was the better part of one hundred years ago.

A great calamity is coming for the people, warns the prophet, and the word that I think of is “consequences.” I won’t presume to preach at you about the reasons for these “natural” disasters, if only because you all are perfectly aware that these things are very much a consequence of human choices for a warming world. Habakkuk told us that the people sinned – they took what was not rightly theirs – and there is a calamitous consequence that will come not long after.

In the same way that Habakkuk stands before God and makes his complaint, we often do as well. God, this doesn’t fit the story. You are good, and loving, and kind, and sure, we have made a mistake, but in your mercy, withdraw this terrible thing from us. It is too much to bear.

I am struck most, in the book of Habakkuk, by its ending. That’s the part we read today.

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.

Habakkuk looks out and sees finally a non-human world that reflects human sin and error. Crop failure. An unthinkable devastation in a subsistence, agricultural

world. And yet, he ends with hope. I will rejoice in the Lord. God is my strength, and I yet will run free.

Is it foolish, even wrong to rejoice in God amidst a world of calamitous bad news? Does it finally confirm that faith is little more than a balm of ignorance? To say that everything’s going to be fine, even against all evidence?

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote about this very idea – the seemingly foolish power of hope in the face of a world in crisis. He wrote, “those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.”

Put another way, Habakkuk rejoices in God and hopes not because he’s ignorant, not because he doesn’t see the trouble of the world, but because he sees all that is and believes that God is doing something radically different, and that he has a part. When the prophet hopes, it isn’t an idle daydream, a maybe someday pie-in-the-sky longing – it’s a belief that God has a good intention and is working for good, and that it is our sacred obligation to work alongside for that good. Hope refuses to cede that the world is meant for calamity. It is meant for good.

Can we rejoice in the Lord this week, as fires still burn and tropical storms bear down? Can we hope in God’s goodness as countless other human-driven injustices weigh down the poor and oppressed of the earth. Can we sing songs of both lament

and gladness? We had better. We had better rejoice in the Lord. We had better hope in God's goodness. Because when we do, we stake a claim. God is not done. This is not all there is, and this is not all there will be. Today we live with the consequences of our sin, yes we do, and perhaps we ought to. But God is still the God of redemption, and God already stands in our tomorrows, guiding us away from our destruction and towards a future marked by love and mutual care. We hope because we will not concede that these are God's purposes. We hope because there is always goodness.

May we pray with Habakkuk –
yet [we] will rejoice in the Lord;
[We] will exult in the God of [our]
salvation.
God, the Lord, is [our] strength;
[who] makes [our] feet like the feet of a
deer,
and makes [us] tread upon the heights.

Amen.