

Sermon – August 2, 2009

## Habakkuk - The Hope There is in Hanging Onto God in Hard Times

Before I read the next lessons from Scripture, a little summer pop Bible quiz to get our thinking going - a quiz about the minor prophet Habakkuk.... The book of Habakkuk is found in the New Testament or Old Testament? Before the book of Psalms or after the Psalms? Before the book of Hezekiah or after the book of Hezekiah?

You're right or wrong - because – there is no book of Hezekiah – he was just a famous king. But – there is a book of Habakkuk - and he sought to speak God's word not far from the time of Amos and Micah and Hosea and Isaiah. But those more well known prophets spoke primarily to the Northern Kingdom – to Israel, and Habakkuk spoke a bit later to the Southern Kingdom – to Judah.

The Northern Kingdom had lost the heart of its faith in God and had fallen – first into the chaos of a country with no religious or moral compass, and then to its enemies. And Habakkuk saw similar ruin ahead for his own people in Judah. He watched his country lose its bearings.

And his message was an echo of his name. His name meant - to clasp - yes – to hold onto. And as he watched troubles roll over his country he both cried out in despair and declared his faith that God would honor God's promises to care for God's people.

As troubles roll over our nation - as the economy still struggles – and we engage in war in another country where no foreign power has ever been successful – as we struggle with deepening divisions between rich and poor – and basic questions of what is right and wrong - it may be helpful, hopeful, for us to hear this prophet's words. And – to hear his own hope echoed in the words of Jesus to his disciples.

Please pray with me - Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your loving and faithful people, be acceptable in your sight and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

Sometimes it seems like – even in the midst of a marvelous summer – that we are living in a constant fog? You know - all around things seem clouded, obscured, uncertain – nothing is very clear at all. The war - how many wars – winning or losing – ending or getting more intense? The economy – almost not getting worse, or still getting worse. Education a hope but half of Americans can't read well enough to be re-trained for new jobs. And add a bit of fear that the deadly swine flu is still coming.

And in the fog - ground fog – or the fog of the stuff around us these days - the funny thing is that it is often very clear if you look straight up. The trouble is mostly around us - not above us. And in a sense that's what the prophet Habakkuk discovered, and declared to the people of his day. Where they looked, where he looked, things were badly clouded, unclear. The nation threatened by enemies without, and by trouble within. Leaders were weak; people did not share

a moral direction, not even agreement on 10 simple rules for life. Faith was out of favor, and God it seemed out of business. And it all sounds too too familiar.

And the prophet wondered about his own faith, about God, and the promises of God in which he'd always trusted. He cried out... O Lord, how long shall I cry for help? Why do you make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Why do the good suffer and the evil prosper? Not new questions – are they? My questions. Yours?

Habakkuk despaired over a God who did not do what Habakkuk thought God ought to do. But – even in his pain and despair – the prophet cried out - cried out to the very God he doubted about.

And - finally – the prophet saw for himself and his people, above all the pain and confusion in life – the only real meaning and security and hope could come, would come, from holding onto God.

And - easy as it is to say - good as it sounds - holding onto God in hard times is no light or easy thing. So much injustice, inequities, corruption. So much suffering. A kind of hopelessness can settle in. Or not... Or not.

In the midst of the fog - a glance up – and – even in the fog, sometimes, sometimes, at night you see stars, in the daylight, sun. A bit wispy, maybe, not as clear a light for living as we'd like - but sight enough to guide us in a way – the way - that is right. And – bright with hope.

And Habakkuk says it - The Lord is in his holy temple - evidence of God's goodness and power all around us - We'd do well – the prophet says – to shut up and listen. He did say it better – let all the earth keep silence. But in our day – in the midst of all our noise – maybe its necessary to be a bit more bold. If we'd shut up a while - we might hear the still small voice of God – and God's word of hope for us in our time.

Have you been fooled by blue tooth like the persons in the commercials? You're in a store and you could swear - okay – no swearing – but you're sure the person in the aisle is talking to you - and being friendly you begin to reply. But they're not talking to you at all. Just to that thing on their ear. This week I thought I had a chance to share faith with some one - But she walked talking right on past.

I have this vision now of Habakkuk feeling the same way in trying to talk to the people of his day – or - yes – stretching a bit - God trying to reach us - with our blogging, and twittering and texting and blue tooth talking - does the still small voice of God stand a chance?

Maybe it is only through earthquake wind and fire - through deep trouble - that we can be convinced, encouraged, to look up – and so find our way out of the pain and struggle and trouble of the fog we are in.

William Stuntz thinks so. In Christian Century he wrote of his nearly perfect life – wife and three great kids – law professor at Harvard. And he talked about how it has all been nearly wiped out by two simple diseases. A debilitating back injury and pain that nearly crippled him – and because of the pressures of the pain and disability and surgeries and medications, his marriage did not survive. And then at age 50 he was diagnosed with cancer – terminal cancer. And even his care has been threatened by a health insurance system that disqualified his one disease because of the other.

And in constant pain – and facing the end of the only life he knows - he has run down every path of possible hope he could find - and he found – even as Habakkuk found - and Jesus did everything he could to help his disciples to find, that above the fog and confusion and pain and suffering and sorrow of so much of life around us -

If we will look up - lift our weary heads and hearts up - we will – above it all - And so, over it all - and so – really in it all - we can, we will, find God - find God caring, God calling, God Comforting -

Habakkuk said – though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines, though the flock is cut off from the fold - though life isn't getting better right now - Yet – I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation.

And that is William Stuntz message out of his misery. A message of mercy and goodness that he says has and is guiding him through all the fog of his pain, and his treatments, and his losses.

He asks - what are God's promises? No illness, ever? No pain, ever? No losses, ever? No injustice, ever? No, suffering, ever? No death at all? Really? Where does it say that? But it does say – though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. It does say that. It does – I will give you rest. And Jesus did say, Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.... So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

This do – in remembrance of me – for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you show the lord's death – til he comes. You and I show his victory in life and ours.

The old poem says – God has not promised skies always blue... and by now in your life you know that is all too true. But God promises – rain or shine – to be there - to be here – with us. God has been here – with us. In Christ God turned evil and death against itself.. and we can turn defeat into victory in our lives.

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And Stuntz says, while there is nothing good, nothing good about my losses and my pain and my death from cancer, or anyone else's suffering. God has already, and God and I can now, make something good of it.

In Christ God made a cross a sign not of death and despair - but a symbol of victory and triumph. And Stuntz says... that truth doesn't just change my life after I die. It changes my life here, now. Now I live not as a victim but as the victor I am and will be in Christ.

Even as we struggle in the fog and pain of truly hard times, we can hang onto God who hangs unto us with a love that will not let us go. The Apostle Paul said it. We are children of God - joint heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with him, that we will be gloried with him.

Even when we are not able to see clearly the next step out of the fog of suffering or pain or confusion or difficulty we are in - we can look up - we can be still, and we can know that God is God, and we can find that God is our strength, that his life affirming death denying presence in Christ is real hope, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

As Eva Rich, a long time member of this Church said years ago from her hospital bed - win or lose this fight, Pastor... I win.

At this table - among those who come to this table - there are no losers. For there is no greater hope or joy in hard times, or any time, than hanging onto God, in whom and with whom all things hang together, forever. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor