

Habakkuk did not prophesy in good times. Habakkuk was alive during the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Judah. It was Josiah who restored the worship of the God of Israel. We are told that after rediscovering the Book of the Law, the Torah, which had been lost during the years of idolatry under previous kings, Josiah had Judah keep such a Passover observance that we are told “**no Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet,**” that’s about 450 years. But good and faithful Josiah had been killed in battle a few years before Habakkuk’s prophecy. Josiah’s son, Jehoahaz, was so wicked and so weak that he reigned only three months. He was captured by the pharaoh of Egypt, the same pharaoh who killed his father, and Jehoahaz died in captivity. The pharaoh made Josiah’s other son king. He also was faithless and weak. First forced to pay tribute to Egypt, his kingdom was overrun by the growing Babylonian Empire, which sliced through rival kingdoms like a hot knife through butter, and he was carted off as a prisoner of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Not happy times. The world seemed in chaos. In a few more years the temple itself would be looted of its treasures and destroyed, God’s people carted off into a 70-year exile. The Old Testament church of God suffered greatly. In the face of all this, Habakkuk pours out his complaint to God. He struggles to understand, what is the purpose of all this, what is the answer? God answers in the words of today’s Old Testament reading. He answers Habakkuk’s complaint saying: “**Write the vision; make it plain on tables so he may run who reads it.**”

It is God Himself who speaks. He alone, His Word alone, is what we are given to make sense of this world, and how we as God’s people relate to Him. This Word is not some secret thing, not given in any sort of code that only special, super-spiritual people can understand, or that must be explained and interpreted by a higher authority. No, as with the words on the tablets of the Law which the Lord gave to Moses, the holy ten commands, God bids His prophet to inscribe His Word plainly. It is in what God says, His plain and clear speech to His people, that we are given what we are to believe and trust in. Scripture, and Scripture alone, is the basis of what is taught, believed, proclaimed, and learned.

That is good not just for Habakkuk and the people of Judah, but it is good for us. Because today is not so different. Egypt and Babylon have faded from the stage of world powers, and many empires after them have fallen into oblivion. There in itself is a stern reminder for us. No earthly nation has the promise of enduring to the end. God’s chosen nation is not any political country. His chosen nation is His holy church, the people of God from all nations. The news, our lives, are filled with chaos not so different from that which Habakkuk saw. It is not so different from 500 years ago. The chaos of today which often causes the suffering of God’s people is aptly summarized in the words of Psalm 46, the basis for Luther’s hymn *A Mighty Fortress*: “**The nations rage, the kingdoms totter**” (Ps 46:6).

Congressmen are shouted down and even shot. Bombs are sent through the mail. The stock market and your life savings swing unpredictably. Neighbors and coworkers get into feuds. Brothers and sisters in Christ bicker and fail to put the best construction on everything. Spouses fight. Children rebel. And the holy church in this world seems to have blemishes a plenty. She is tempted to trust in the ways of the world, the lures of marketing, the popularity of wishy-washy people-pleasing rather than the pure doctrine of God’s clear Word. The clear teachings of Scripture are denied out of convenience or fear.

Just as it was God’s Word that Habakkuk needed, God’s Word is what we need. For as we live in this world we wait. The Lord tells Habakkuk, “**For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.**” Israel waited, she longed, for the promised redemption. As she did, she suffered, she bickered, she fought. She fell into faithlessness toward God and lovelessness toward the neighbor. Not much has changed. 500 years ago the traditions of men and the decrees of popes were held above God’s Word. What God gave as a gift to His people in the Holy Communion, man presumed to offer back to God in order to merit grace. The full and free forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ was exchanged for human works as the way to ensure salvation, or at the very least, give you the hope of less time in purgatory.

The Messiah was a long time in coming. That had to await its appointed time. But it surely came. So also the Lord’s return is a long time in coming. It has to await its appointed time. And as we wait the holy church continually

contends against the troubles of this world and even raging within. For in our weakness we are always tempted to turn from God's Word towards another authority, a supposed greater power, whether kings of the earth, the authority of other men, or even the dictatorship of our own thoughts. We are tempted to turn from God's grace, His loving-kindness for us in His Son, and would rather rely upon ourselves, our righteous acts, deeds of kindness, at the very least our good intentions and self-justifications.

But hear the warning of God's Word, His clear Word, inscribed on tablet, given to you on printed paper to read, proclaimed for you to hear. He warns those who think they are righteous in themselves, who would stand before Him on their own supposed goodness, who would save themselves by pulling themselves up by their own bootstrap: **"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him."** Apart from Christ, with no trust in His saving merits alone, there is only either arrogance and unrighteousness or despair. This is what Luther learned so terribly well. The solution, the comfort, the answer to our fears, to our insecurities, to our sin and to death itself, is only in Christ.

He is the object of our faith. It is He whom we grasp with all our might, for He has all the goods. That is how we live. That is how we live before God. That is how we live in this world as we wait for His coming again in glory. **"The righteous shall live by his faith."** That is the message of the Old and of the New Testaments. That is what it means to be a Christian. That is what today is about. It's not about Luther, how great Luther is. We thank God for Luther. Through him God brought the truth of His Word to light again from darkness. We rightly call him the chief teacher or confessor of the faith. Not because of who he was in himself or because he was perfect. But because of what is so beautifully depicted on our bulletin this morning. Today, every day, the heart and center of our doctrine and practice, what we believe, teach, and confess, what we are called to trust in, is not Luther, but the one to whom Luther points: Christ crucified. The Messiah, the Savior, by whose death we stand before God as just and holy people. This is what faith believes and receives. This is what we live and die by.

**God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when morning dawns.
The nations rage, the kingdoms dotter;
He utters His voice, the earth melts.
The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.**

Because that is true we take the words of the hymn upon our lips:

*Though devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill;
They shall not overpower us.
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will,
He can harm us none.
He's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him.*

*The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict'ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*