“Why God, why?”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Habakkuk 1:1-4
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The Biblical prophets aren’t likely to win any popularity contests. They’re not known for their tact and diplomacy. Their in-your-face assertiveness may explain why church people are reluctant to read them and preachers are disinclined to preach them.

Habakkuk is unique among the Minor Prophets. While the others speak God’s Word to people, he speaks our word to God. He gives voice to what we’re feeling and thinking. He’s not shy about verbalizing his disappointment to God. You may wonder, can we really talk this way to God?

Habakkuk’s prophecy is arranged in three sections. In the first two sections, our prophet registers his complaints which God in turn answers. In the last section, Habakkuk closes with prayer. While he leads with complaint, he ends with prayer.

Habakkuk’s first complaint holds nothing back: “God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, ‘Help! Murder! Police!’ before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil and stare trouble in the face day after day?” (The Message Habakkuk1:2-3).

Habakkuk wrestles here with the problem of evil. The formal name for this dilemma is something called theodicy. The triangle on the screen illustrates the conundrum. If God is all powerful and all good, how do we account for evil in the world? If God is unable to remove evil, then God lacks greatness. If God has the power to eliminate evil but chooses not to do so, then God lacks goodness.

God answers Habakkuk’s complaint in the most surprising manner: “Look! Look long and hard. Brace yourselves for a shock. Something’s about to take place and you’re going to find it hard to believe. I’m about to raise up Babylonians to punish you, Babylonians, fierce and ferocious—World-conquering Babylon, grabbing up nations right and left, a dreadful and terrible people, making up its own rules as it goes along” (Habakkuk1:5-7 in The Message).

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The Babylonians are the Al-Qaeda of 7th century BC. They are first-class terrorists. You can almost anticipate Habakkuk’s second complaint. “God, you chose Babylonians for your judgment work? You gave them the job of discipline? But you can’t be serious! You can’t condone evil. So why don’t you do something about this? Why are you silent now? This outrage! Evil men swallow up the righteous and you stand around and watch!” (Habakkuk 1:13 in The Message).

Habakkuk can’t understand why God would punish injustice with more injustice. Why would God visit judgment on His people with a godless nation?

God answers Habakkuk’s second complaint, “Write what you see. Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run. This vision is a witness to what’s coming. It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait! And it doesn’t lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It’s on its way. It will come right on time.” (Habakkuk 2:2-3 in The Message).

The answer to Habakkuk’s complaint will come in God’s way and in God’s time. If it seems slow in coming, take a chill pill. It’s on the way!

Then God delivers the punch line, “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). Those who are just, who seek to do the right thing, will live by faith. This verse may not seem like much, but it rocks the 16th century world.

Martin Luther was a monk in the late Middle Ages. The dominant belief in Luther’s day was that people had to earn their way into heaven. The practice of good works was intended to win favor with God. It got so convoluted that the church began to assign years off in purgatory for specific acts of devotion and service.

Martin Luther was zealous about doing good works to win favor with God. He once remarked, “I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.” Luther went on a pilgrimage to Rome and visited the Church of the Lateran. Tradition has it that the 25 marble steps in the church were the same steps Jesus
travelled from Pilate’s Hall of Judgment to the hill of Calvary. Every step pilgrims climbed on their knees resulted in a year’s worth of indulgence or forgiveness of sins. If you climbed all 25 steps on your knees, your sins over the last 25 years would be blotted out. Two or three visits to these steps would get the job done. It bothered Luther that some of the priests and monks in Rome lived immoral lives. They assumed that once they completed the pilgrimage to receive God’s forgiveness, they could do pretty much anything they wanted.

Luther joined the faithful in climbing the holy stairs of the Lateran. Halfway to the top, a voice inside Luther’s head spoke the words of Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith.” It was an epiphany for Luther; a seminal moment. He stood up and left the church. He wrote of that moment, “When, by the Spirit of God, I understood these words, ‘The just shall live by faith,’ I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God.”

Pastor Tim Keller, in his book, Prodigal God, writes that people approach religion in two ways. The first way is to say: “I obey; therefore I am accepted by God.” The second way is its very opposite: “I am accepted by God; therefore I obey.” Luther struggled in vain to obey God so completely that he would earn acceptance with God. He came to realize that acceptance with God is based on God’s favor and not our merit. When we receive God’s gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, we are accepted by God’s grace, rather than our good works. Don’t you see? “The just shall live by faith.”

Habakkuk’s prayer in the last chapter of his prophecy seems a fitting conclusion. He has taken God’s counsel to heart and is willing to wait for God’s answer to unfold. His complaints have been replaced by appeals to God’s mercy. “God, I’ve heard what our ancestors say about you, and I’m stopped in my tracks, down on my knees. Do among us what you did among them. Work among us as you worked among them. And, as you bring judgment, as you surely must, remember mercy” (3:2).

The last three verses of Habakkuk’s prayer are worth the wait! I encourage you to read Habakkuk this week and digest these last few verses. They expand on what it means that “the just shall live by faith.”
“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.”

Habakkuk will no longer judge God’s goodness by the vexing circumstances of his life. He will trust God’s grace and sufficiency.

There’s an old hymn written of these verses from Habakkuk’s prayer. It’s not well known nor does it appear in any modern hymnbooks. It was composed by William Cowper (1731-1800), who was a member of John Newton’s parish in Olney, England. Newton was a captain of a slave ship before his conversion to Christ and call into ministry. Newton recognized Cowper’s poetic genius alongside his bouts of depression. Newton invited Cowper to help in assembling a hymnbook for use in worship. Cowper threw himself into the project and cranked out 68 hymns during this creative period. The result was one of the first hymnbooks called the Olney Hymns. Newton did his part also; contributing the hymn Amazing Grace.

The last line of Cowper’s hymn Sometimes a Light Surprises reads this way:

“Though vine nor fig tree neither their wonted fruit should bear, though all the fields should wither nor flocks nor herds be there yet God the same abiding, his praise shall tune my voice, for while in him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.”

Given what we know about Cowper, his words leap off the page. He doesn’t trust his mood or his circumstances. He trusts in God.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three suggestions for your consideration today.
First, Practice Trust.  “The just shall live by faith?”  Don’t live by your ever-changing circumstances; live in faith.  Trust in God.

I rewrote Habakkuk’s prayer to fit our current reality:

Though I may get passed over for a promotion  
or work for a bozo for a boss;
Though I might not get into the college of my dreams  
or receive the recognition I think I’m due;
Though my circumstances don’t look promising  
and the breaks aren’t falling my way;
Though I ask God “Why?”  
And cry out, “How long, O Lord,”
Yet I will find joy in the Lord  
and trust God’s good purposes for my life.

Second, Learn to Wait.  If God’s vision for your life seems slow in coming, wait for it.  It’s on the way.  It comes right on time!

We hate to wait.  Lord knows we do enough of it.  We wait at traffic lights.  We wait at grocery store checkout lines.  We wait in TSA security lines.  We wait to see a doctor in (you guessed it) a waiting room.  We wait to speak to a customer service agent.  We even wait for God!

The Psalms speak of waiting on God.  Last month, I compiled a list of Psalms for you to read on spiritual dryness.  I’ve assembled another list of Psalms to help us learn the value of waiting.  If you struggle with patience, consider reading a Psalm each day on waiting.  (You will find this list of Psalms at the end of this sermon.)
3. Pray for Renewal

**Third, Pray for Renewal.** This last recommendation is directed to us collectively as a church. “Do among us what you did among our ancestors. Work among us as you worked among them. As you bring judgment, as surely you must, remember mercy.” Bring renewal in our day. Do it again, Lord. Revive us again.

Psalms on Waiting
Mon., July 21 Psalm 25 – For You I wait all day long
Tues., July 22 Psalm 27 – Wait for the Lord
Wed., July 23 Psalm 31 – Let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord
Thurs., July 24 Psalm 33 – Our soul waits for the Lord
Fri., July 25 Psalm 37 – Be still and wait patiently for the Lord
Sat., July 26 Psalm 38 – It is for you, O Lord, that I wait
Sun., July 27 Psalm 39 – What do I wait for? My hope is in you
Mon., July 28 Psalm 40 – I waited patiently for the Lord
Tues., July 29 Psalm 62 – For God alone my soul waits in silence
Wed., July 30 Psalm 69 – My eyes grow dim with waiting for God
Thurs., July 31 Psalm 91 – I trust and wait upon God
Fri., Aug. 1 Psalm 130 – I wait for the Lord
Sat., Aug. 2 Psalm 145 – The Lord upholds all who wait upon Him
Sun., Aug. 3 Psalm 146 – Happy are those who wait upon the Lord