

Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 1:

“The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. 2 O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. 4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds.”

"The Prophet's Complaint"

Before I begin this morning's message I want to speak for just a moment about where we will be going this year at Church of the King, Lord willing! Today is Epiphany Sunday and the church calendar typically focuses on the manifestation of Christ and His earthly ministry between now and Easter Sunday. Here at Church of the King we have also made it a practice to focus on the grievous sin of abortion on the Sunday nearest to the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision on January 22nd. My plan this year is to do a short series of three messages from the Prophet Habakkuk that bring these two together and then a short series on the Gospel of Mark leading up to Easter. After Easter I will begin an exegetical series on the Book of Genesis, which might take some time! Mike will also bring some messages in 2013 when I am on vacation or traveling, doing a series of sermons on the Book of Philippians.

So why the Book of Habakkuk?

I have often called Habakkuk, America's prophet because he brings a message that seems very relevant for our troubled times. I will also try to make the case that it is a book of hope, when we see hope in the Biblical way that Mike taught us about last week.

- **We can face some very difficult circumstances and still know that our hope is in the Lord!**

In fact I would argue that studying this prophet is a very appropriate follow-up to our series of sermons on Acts and our celebration of Advent...

- **Both of which should have given us great hope!**

Hope because Jesus has brought glory to the Father by coming to save His people from their sins and hope because the Spirit is bringing glory to the Son by filling the earth with His kingdom!

- **So how does thinking honestly about the sin of abortion or the general state of our nation bring hope and not just despair?**

Well, that is what I trust we learn from the prophet Habakkuk. It is also a lesson that we learn near the end of the Christmas account if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Pastor Wilson has commented that it might be good to have a few of Herod's soldiers standing around in our nativity scenes.

- **Why you might ask?**

Because the slaughter of those children is part of the Christmas account, though it is certainly not pleasant.

- **But here we are reminded that the Bible is an honest Book!**

The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and the great plan of salvation that He has for His people, but that revelation includes the bad news as well as the Good News. As I reminded us a few weeks ago, the Good News is REALLY good news because the bad news is really bad.

We don't see the glory of man's redemption if we fail to see the depths of his depravity and we are reminded of this right there in the midst of the glorious Christmas accounts that we all love to share.

- Having a few of those soldiers standing around the stable scene would serve as a good reminder of how honest the Bible really is.

This account is given to us by Matthew following the visit of the Magi who came bearing gifts for the new born King... Matthew 2:16 “Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."”

Our nation faced this type of grief during this Christmas season because of the school shooting in Connecticut, and we can only begin to imagine how difficult these weeks have been for those who live in that small town. Was there hope for those mothers in Bethlehem? Could any hope be given to the family and friends of those school children today?

- NOT without God and His revelation as we will learn from the Prophet Habakkuk...

The truth does not make all things nice, but the truth does give us hope!

Matthew quoted the 31st chapter of Jeremiah which clearly foretold of this tragic event but it did not leave those parents, nor us in despair. Not only does the Prophet tell those mothers to have hope, but there is hope for the Nation of Israel and all the world... The hope that was declared by the angels to the shepherds... Jeremiah 31:31 “Behold, the days are coming, says Jehovah, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah-- 32 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says Jehovah. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says Jehovah: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know Jehovah,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says Jehovah. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." [and reminding us about the importance of Genesis, God confirms all this in verse 35] “Thus says Jehovah, Who gives the sun for a light by day, The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, Who disturbs the sea, And its waves roar (Jehovah of hosts is His name).

Just as Matthew demonstrated in his Gospel, we are to weep with those who weep and not make light of their circumstances...

- BUT we must also remember that the only real comfort that can be offered in such circumstances is the hope of the Gospel!

And this brings us to the Prophet Habakkuk:

- The portion that we read this morning as our text is known as the prophet’s complaint.

The prophet is troubled by what he sees around him and cries out to God for action...

2 “O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?”

Before I get into the content and timing of his complaint, there are two very important lessons for us to learn...

- Yes, the application portion is coming a bit early, but these are important lessons!

The first one is the lesson we should learn from the entire book of Habakkuk, as short as it is:

- The prophet is having a conversation with God! An honest conversation as we shall see.

This is something that is not uncommon in the Scriptures and something we should not be afraid of even today as we serve not just as priest or prophets, but sons and daughters of the King! Remember the conversation that Abraham had with God before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham approached the Lord in fear and very respectfully, but he continued to press his case for mercy and in the end learned that God was willing to be very merciful. There were several places where Moses interceded for the people of God when the Lord said He was willing to destroy them and start over, demonstrating again the mercy of God. We even see an honest conversation when the prophet Elijah is at his wits end because he feared Jezebel. The prophet gives God his view of the situation and the Lord reminds him that He has many who have NOT bowed the knee to Baal.

In all these situations we see that there is hope in the end, as will be the case with Habakkuk, but I want us to see that we should not be afraid to have such honest conversations with the Lord even today.

- **This can be true with personal struggles we may be having or in accessing our national sins as well.**

In other words, it is a good thing to wrestle with God! We can even be forceful in stating our concerns or making our case, but we must remember to be humble and respectful as well.

- **This is the second important lesson and we are reminded of it each year in the Christmas accounts that we love to hear.**

Last week we read together the two accounts of Gabriel's appearance:

One to Zacharias with the news that Elizabeth would bare a son and the second to Mary with news that she would bear God's own Son. Both Zacharias and Mary proceeded to have a conversation with God's messenger and the results were quite different. This should peak our interest because the responses seem to be the same...

Zacharias said, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

Mary said, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

- **Both are certainly raising important questions when you consider what they have been told.**

However, Zacharias is struck dumb for nine months and Mary is given the answer she sought...

- **What was the difference?**

Obviously it was the attitude with which the question was asked and let me try to demonstrate this with what may have been their tone:

Zacharias said, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years."

Mary said, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

So yes, we can have honest conversations with God or His messengers, but we must be humble and respectful when doing so. [I would point out as an aside that this is also a great lesson for our married couples and children: How we say something can be much more important than the words we choose].

Now let me use the same tone of voice test to give two different reading to the Prophet's complaint:

First with the attitude of Zacharias:

2 "O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?"

Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. 4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds."

And now with the attitude of Mary:

2 “O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?” Even cry out to You, “Violence!” And You will not save. 3 Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. 4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds.”

As we go on in the Book of Habakkuk we will see that God does not strike the Prophet with silence or even ignore his cries... God carries on a lengthy discussion and brings the Prophet to a point of hope even in the midst of some very uncomfortable circumstances. So Habakkuk is being very honest, even very emotional...

➤ But he is coming to God with the proper humility and respect.

So what is his complaint and why do I refer to him as America’s prophet? Habakkuk cries out to God somewhere near the end of the reign of King Manasseh...

2 “O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?”

Even cry out to You, “Violence!” And You will not save.”

By this time the northern Kingdom had been carried away, but Judah continued to be a thriving nation. Their kings won battles and Solomon’s Temple stood in all of its glory. The economy was OK and no one was starving. And yet there was great sin in the land which the Prophet could see and thus he honestly wondered how long God could look the other way. The Prophet was not wrong in his assessment and we also know that God was not ignoring what was going on... In fact we read these chilling words when the Kingdom of Judah is finally sent off into the Babylonian captivity many years later...

II Kings 23:26: “Nevertheless Jehovah did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath, with which His anger was aroused against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him.”

The great sin of King Manasseh was idolatry, idolatry that grew so bold that it led to the slaughter of children on the red-hot hands of Moloch’s statue. Judah was looking to other gods for their material comfort and security and were even willing to sacrifice the children God had blessed them with to achieve the good life.

So can I make the case for Habakkuk as America’s prophet? It is not difficult when you consider the history of western civilization and the current events in our nation. The Christendom of Europe has clearly been sent off into the captivity of apostasy and humanism.

While many here in America still believe that we are still on the right road, we too have embraced the idols of evolution and man’s reason and have even followed in the steps of King Manasseh with the slaughter of almost sixty million children in the name of choice and convenience.

➤ This alone causes many of us to cry with the Prophet: “O Jehovah, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear?” Even cry out to You, “Violence!” And You will not save.”

IF our cry comes with the same humility and respect that we will see in the Prophet Habakkuk, then it is a good thing. We should be troubled, and troubled greatly by many of the sins that surround us today. We should continue in the prophet’s cry...

3 “Why do You show me iniquity, And cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. 4 Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds.”

I have started with the obvious sin of abortion, but there are many others:

I don’t think it would be hard to make the case that we see much plundering and violence in our state and national governments today.

The state and national tax burden on a successful businessman here in California this year will reach almost 57% PLUS 7.5% of his payroll and any other business taxes he must pay. This makes us long for those burdensome medieval days when the feudal lords demanded a full 25% of everything the poor serfs produced. It is also not very hard to make the case that we see a lot of strife and contention...

- Certainly in our national politics and dialogs, but more sadly in our homes and communities as well.

Need I give you examples of how the wicked surround the righteous today?

Google ‘Christians praying in the Castro district if you want to see one of the most chilling examples... But we must remember that it also comes in much more subtle ways.

- Is it surprising that the generations of children raised on Disney movies have become disobedient and have little or no respect for fathers.

And of course we all know that there are many examples of injustice in our society today. Where an abortionist who makes his living killing children can also violate serious health codes and have the authorities look the other way, while a single mom struggling to make ends meet can face financial ruin because of fines and penalties assessed for running a red light or even not having the proper insurance or registration papers... Lest you think I am exaggerating, just go spend a few hours in any typical traffic court today, no less what you would see at the Superior Court level.

So we live in a time and nation where I think it is quite appropriate for us to lift up a compliant before our God as the Prophet Habakkuk did: How long Lord, how long.

- However, we must remember that it must be done humbly and respectfully!

AND as we will learn in the coming weeks, we must be ready to accept and even rejoice in the answer that God chooses to give us.

- Remembering that our hope is in the Lord!

So we should take away two important lessons from today...

- It is OK and even healthy to have honest conversations with our God and Savior.

I have given several Old Testament examples, but we can see the same in the New Testament with even Jesus pleading with His father in the Garden of Gethsemane or the Apostle Paul asking God to remove his thorn in the flesh three times.

We must remember that we now serve God in the fullest of the new covenant so we have the Holy Spirit as our guide and comforter with Paul reminding us that “the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” Whether you have financial or relational problems or are just overwhelmed by the evil of our day, take your concerns to the Lord!

- Be bold, be honest and if you come with the right attitude, God will answer such prayers.

And finally, we should have learned the importance of assessing things from God’s perspective as the Prophet Habakkuk did with his times.

- The sin that surrounds us in our nation should trouble us and if it does not then we are in trouble!

As John Calvin commented on this portion of Scripture, “all who really serve and love God, OUGHT ACCORDING to the Prophet’s example, to burn with holy indignation whenever they see wickedness, reigning without restraint among men, and especially in the Church of God.”

The world will gladly teach you to laugh at sin and to ignore the consequences of disobedience...

But to do so you must leave Lady Wisdom at the door and that is a very dangerous place to be.

The Prophet Habakkuk could have gone along to get along and probably been a very “important” person in the King’s Court or the Temple.

We will often face such choices in our personal lives and the Church in America certainly faces this choice on a national level.

May God grant us the grace and strength to make the right choices and to see the wisdom in the course the King of Kings will set us on!

➤ **And that brings us to our lesson for next week!**

Communion meditation: Acts 2

“42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. 46 So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.