

The Carols (II): Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

Habakkuk 2.17-20; 3.1-6, 16-19

December 6, 2020

Hab 2.17-20 "What profit is the idol when its maker has carved it, Or an image, a teacher of falsehood? For its maker trusts in his own handiwork When he fashions speechless idols. ¹⁹ "Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, 'Awake!' To a mute stone, 'Arise!' And that is your teacher? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all inside it. ²⁰ "But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him."

3.1-6 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth. ² LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known; In wrath remember mercy. ³ God comes from Teman, And the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His splendor covers the heavens, And the earth is full of His praise. ⁴ His radiance is like the sunlight; He has rays flashing from His hand, and there is the hiding of His power. ⁵ Before Him goes pestilence, and plague comes after Him. ⁶ He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed. His ways are everlasting.

3.16ff I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us. ¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength, And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.

During this ADVENT SEASON, we're looking, at some of the carols the church sings during this season of preparation. IF WE muse on these old hymns, they may break up the junk in our souls.

Last week we mused on an ancient carol and THIS WEEK, we ponder ANOTHER one. In fact, for some 1,400 years the Christian Church has been singing this hymn, also written in Latin and translated into English under the title "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence".

The title probably comes from a few passages from the Hebrew Bible; we're looking at one of them... the Prophet Habakkuk (7th C BC) and his call to the entire human race to stop talking ... to BE SILENT and LISTEN...to pay attention to a happening ...

Blaise Pascal, the 17th C mathematician and Christian thinker anticipated our age of distraction when he wrote these famous words: "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room".

Others have followed Pascal, observing that we crave diversions/distractions because we don't want to sit and think about dying. We're afraid of regret (past) and of judgment (future). We dread looking within so we amuse ourselves with technology or alcohol or sports or shopping or hobbies because silence is so scary.

When a person heeds God's call and enters this kind of SILENCE with Him, it has a transforming effect on the person's outlook and his/her whole approach to life... THIS PROPHET GOT worked up about God's apparent mismanagement of the world then he comes to this silence and then he's... changed.

So, let's look at:

- 1) The Prophet Shook UP (Agitated)
- 2) The Prophet Sorted OUT (Elevated)

This prophet has a problem ... he's supposed to be explaining God to the people but HE HIMSELF DOESN'T understand/agree with what God is doing!

The book begins with the prophet lamenting the low state of society. God's not doing anything to stop all the injustice and brutality in His Church/State.

And God actually responds – "I'm about to act in a way that NO ONE would ever imagine: I'll stop the violence/injustice in My people... by the Chaldeans!"

WHAT? God's going to use Israel's cruel, idolatrous enemy (Babylon) to correct the Church. And NOW God's prophet is really disappointed WITH GOD! He's angry with God... HE ACCUSES GOD!

AND this is a problem! Because God's spokesman doesn't agree with God ... so how can he speak for God? He can't carry out his calling! (He's agitated!)

C.S. Lewis wrote a very famous essay called "God in the Dock". The "dock" is the term used in English jurisprudence for the place where the ACCUSED stands in a court of law. The defendant stands "in the dock." The point of the essay is to say that ancient people (whether they were Greeks or Romans or Pagan or Jewish) universally they saw themselves as being IN THE DOCK – saw themselves as having to answer to the deity as to a judge.

But (Lewis said) modern people see THEMSELVES as the judge; we demand that God stand in the dock and defend Himself and answer for the wars and the famines and natural disasters that plague humanity.

And here, Habakkuk, God's very modern-sounding prophet was asking God for a defense... was putting God on trial ... putting God in the dock.

And we're sort of surprised (even if we ARE modern people) we wonder if this is a wise thing for a prophet to do ... We wonder if a lightning bolt is going to STRIKE this insolent, accusing prophet ... BUT instead, God does indeed OFFER a defense!

"I'm about to do something that will make everyone stunned... No one will believe their eyes. Totally and completely unexpected; CH 1, v5 'Be astonished!...'"

Habakkuk says, "Lord, that's not an answer! Of course this seems ridiculous and self-defeating: it's like a parent of an out-of-control child and the parent hires a bully to teach the little child a lesson. God is using MUGGERS to discipline HIS children!"

"The Chaldeans (Babylonians) are like the kings of idolatry and You, Lord, are going to use them to teach YOUR PEOPLE about the evils of idolatry?! And You realize, Lord, they'll destroy YOUR work?!"

THAT'S the prophet's agitation: he just doesn't agree with God's methods – it doesn't make sense... it's all counter-productive ... and IF ISRAEL IS GOD'S OWN CAUSE IN THE WORLD – why would God ruin His own cause??? Is God self-destructive?

"The whole world is going to laugh at the God who can't protect His own people... They'll say, 'Look, the idols of Babylon are stronger than the God of Israel!! – Your God has failed! '"

So that's the prophet's agitation. He's shook up!

Now let's see how He got sorted out (or elevated).

- + What was the result of the sorting out?
- + How did it occur – how'd he GET there?

The result of this change is the ability to rise above even the worst possible circumstances?

The end of the reading tells of his elevation:

I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, YET I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my

salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on high places.

He's contemplating TOTAL disaster: a day when the Babylonians (Chaldeans) are allowed by God to destroy the entire economy of Jerusalem ... and there is nothing in the retirement account ... and no money in the ATM...system failure ... and nothing on the shelves of Publix ...

Some of the fears facing the world TODAY... but worse! It's like the worst thing you could imagine for you and your family.

AND in the midst of that he says, "I now know that WHEN that day comes... I will have joy in God ... I will be satisfied in God"

"AND that satisfaction will enable me to get above it all ... He has made my way as surefooted as a deer and makes me walk on high places. Elevated."

"I have gotten to a place where I see beyond the trouble ... a place where my inward disposition is not dependent on my outward circumstances ... where inwardly, I have transcendent JOY ... even if the whole bottom falls out of my life."

It's NOT will-power or positive-mental-attitude. It's NOT an escape from reality ... He sees what's coming... HE FEELS IT... He knows that God has ordained this ... and that he is called to it.

Habakkuk isn't just saying some perky, syrupy religious bumper sticker... HE IS BEING ENABLED TO RISE ABOVE HIS TROUBLE (to walk on the heights) to know an inward SURE-FOOTEDNESS and balance and a gracefulness of the soul that doesn't depend on having money... or health ... or respect from others ... or even having enough to eat.

So... HOW'D the prophet get to that place?

He got silent. "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" – he entered into that quiet place with God. At the end of his rope – agitated and facing disaster he sees God as the Ruler of history. The ways of religion won't help Habakkuk here. He won't be able to bribe God like idolaters bribe their statues – but everyone knows it all depends on the worshiper (having the right offering – working the religious program!)

But God tells the prophet – religion is just an extension of YOU! You shape the idol so how's the idol going to shape YOU? Transactional religion where YOU do for God so He'll do for YOU – really depends on YOU... You have to fool yourself.

But in the silence the prophet sees the alternative: the God of Israel is NOT our program. He's not simply an extension of ourselves. YHWH is not a plan we can WORK. We can't bribe or buy Him by giving Him what He needs – HE NEEDS NOTHING!

"He's the uncontrollable God. We can't get up to Him – He comes down to us." "God comes from Teman..." The prophet remembers Israel's history, God leading them through the Exodus as the Divine Warrior. WE didn't climb up to Him – He came down to us."

Habakkuk saw how secure this TRUE and WILD God is. He's so secure in who He is that HE'S NOT afraid to lose His cause... HE IS NOT worried that if Babylon destroys His nation and His Temple that HE'S going to be frustrated/thwarted... The theme verse of the entire Bible is in THIS book: CH 2, v 14:"The earth WILL be filled with the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea"

God says, "I rule history and I will be universally known as the ONE TRUE AND LIVING GOD... I'm not afraid that if My Israel is destroyed, I'll lose face... I'm not afraid of what the world will say and I'm not afraid of what you will say, Prophet!"

"I'm not afraid of being IN THE DOCK!"

In fact, THIS IS THE GOD... who did stand IN THE DOCK! He came DOWN into our stuff (the stuff we dread thinking about at night, in the silence).

He came down so far to us, became God-With-Us (Immanuel – Isa 7.14, Mat 1.23) – came so low to be WITH US that He actually became ONE of us... Came into the world just like we do – through the womb of a woman and He became a Baby:

*With blessing in His hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.
King of kings, yet born of Mary*

And after He lived a life of perfect love, He did stand accused...and in a sense He pleaded, "guilty". This is the God, who faced the collective anger of humanity against God... When He was hung naked and we accused Him and despised Him and spit at Him and insulted Him. We put God in the dock.

AND not only OUR misguided accusations against God... This is the God who became a Man and was charged with the all crimes of all His people and pleads "guilty" before the Law of God (guilty of MY crimes) and MY punishment fell on Him.

The prophet prays, "O LORD, ...in wrath remember mercy..." (3.2) But did Habakkuk know HOW God would answer that prayer? "In mercy I will take into Myself the wrath/justice you deserve."

Let all the earth make noise and mock and say, "Look... God is dying on a cross!" But in facing the charges for me... by standing in the dock for me ... Jesus Christ's defeat is God's greatest victory.

Habakkuk wrote the words that became the theme verse for the Protestant Reformation. Ch 2, v.4: "as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by faith."

And, see to get to this place...enabled to transcend life's greatest troubles... you don't have to be a good person ... In fact, if you ARE a good person and you know it ... you're SUNK! YOU only have to be a trusting person...

THIS GOD WHO IN Jesus Christ was willing to stand and be accused for you...willing to take the blame for YOUR failings and sins ... HE says to YOU: "BE QUIET... HUSH... stop the excuses (instead of defending yourself: PRACTICE SILENCE!)... I am coming – in the ultimate absurdity ...coming to do what doesn't make sense: "Lord of Lord's in human vesture... His own Self our heavenly food..."

It makes no sense – God using the Babylonians to correct His people. It makes even less sense – God, in Jesus Christ, obeying for the disobedient, dying for the guilty and rising from death for me.

Truth is there's a lot in this life that doesn't seem to make sense... you don't have to figure it all out ... you just have to be silent, stop the excuses and blaming and simply believe ... And that's the final question: Will you be silent and WILL YOU BELIEVE?

WILL you simply be quiet ... entrust your past, present and future into the nail-scarred hands of the God who stood in the dock for you?