

Aug 3, 2008 8:30 & 11am Worship Rev. Donald W. Hackett, D.Min.

First Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA

Text: Book of Habakkuk

Topic: The Minor Prophets – Habakkuk

Main point – **Our choice is always fear or faith.**

Key Passage – Habakkuk 3:17-19

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.*

Introduction

It is getting harder to find good news. Turn on the radio and the stock market has dropped again. Open the newspaper and you will find that another senseless murder has occurred, and another tragic accident has claimed the life of a teenager, and a suicide bombing has rocked the heart of yet another battered community. If you haven't noticed, these are tough times for more and more people.

We have had more individuals coming to the church looking for financial assistance than any other time I can remember in my ten years here at First Presbyterian Church. We have performed more funerals in the last six months that we typically do in a year. Housing prices are as low as I can remember and whole industries are dragging, trying to stay in business. Where do you go when all around you is falling apart? What do you do when fear is knocking at your door? We always have a choice in every situation. **We can choose fear or we can choose faith.**

Background

Let's step back over 2700 years to the time of the Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian empire. The scepter of power had left the hands of the Assyrians and now was growing strong in the Babylonians. The Babylonians had routed the Egyptian army at Carchemish in 605B.C. and chased them right to the Egyptian border. This put them in prime position to attack Judah, which they did repeatedly. Sitting in the middle of all this was a man named Habakkuk.

We do not know much about this Hebrew prophet even though he served around the same period as the prophet Jeremiah. He wrote just three short chapters, less than 1400 words, and is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

He probably lived during the reign of King Josiah of Judah (look at the chart in your bulletin). Some think his name is Babylonian and refers to a garden plant. Others say his name means "one who embraces" or "one who folds hands". I think that meaning is going to be significant for us today... "one who embraces."

1. Habakkuk Questions

Habakkuk was disturbed by what he saw. All around him there were people fighting, violence, and wicked behavior. In God's country, Judah, a religious people were doing very bad things. He writes in chapter one this complaint to God: *3 Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. 4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.*

Sound familiar? If you and I were sitting in another city or some other country this morning, we might be thinking the same thing. People who yearn for justice and compassion are suffering greatly in places like Columbia, Venezuela, South Africa, North Korea, Afghanistan, Uganda, and Sudan to name a few. They are asking the same question, "Why, God? Why?" **Where are you and I questioning God today?** Is a family member sick? Are we financially strapped? Has violence marred our network of family and friends?

The first lesson of faith Habakkuk shows us is that our questions are important. God invites you and me to come to him with our questions, all of them. Questions are a part of our ongoing conversation with God. Sincere questions help us develop a deeper relationship with God. They draw us closer to God even when they feel like they are pushing us away. Habakkuk is unique among the Minor Prophets because he engages with God in these hard issues. Habakkuk had hard questions and he needed help from God to understand. Honest questions help us move from fear to faith.

Habakkuk knew his country was in trouble. The government at the time was corrupt and the religious system a mess. Businesses were taking advantage of the people and the poor were neglected. Everywhere Habakkuk looked his culture was coming apart. He cried out to God in verse one: *How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?* God answered, but not in the way he expected.

God declared that he was going to discipline his wayward child, the nation of Judah, by allowing the Babylonians to come and conquer them. In chapter

one, verse 6 God says: *I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.* Unthinkable! How could a Holy God use such vile means to win back his people? Habakkuk could not get his mind around the fact God would allow such a thing to happen! *We struggle with this, too, don't we? We are baffled by the ways evil keeps lashing out with no end in sight. How could a gunman, last week, enter a church and just start shooting away? How can little, innocent children be dragged off in dozens of countries to a life of sweatshops and prostitution with no one to rescue them? How can it be?*

2. Habakkuk Questions and Waits

Habakkuk raises these questions and then waits. Chapter two begins: *“I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.”* **The second lesson of faith Habakkuk demonstrates for us is patient waiting.**

There are many questions that we will have that will be with us for a long time. Some may never get fully answered this side of Heaven. There are answers, though, that will come to us if we are in a posture to listen. Habakkuk climbed to the top of the city wall, in the watch tower, to wait for God to reply. *We need to find our places to wait. Alone in the kitchen with your Bible in the early morning, driving with your car quiet on the inside and asking God to help you listen, or journaling in your notebook at the end of the day...these are all ways to wait on God.*

God answers Habakkuk in chapter two, verse 2: *“Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.”* God reminds Habakkuk though it seems far off, evil will end. It will self-destruct. Those who employ evil for gain will eventually be consumed by it. This was true for the Babylonians. They repeatedly attacked and finally conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The Babylonians would rule for another fifty years, only to be overtaken by the Medes and the Persians.

Violence, cheating, corruption, and lust are cancers that slowly feed on the people who engage in such actions. In contrast, the righteous live by faith in God who will meet them in their distress and rescue them. Habakkuk states in 2:4 that *“the righteous will live by his faith.”* The rescue for some comes in this life. For many people, victims of war, violence, famine, and natural disaster, the rescue comes in the next life. Habakkuk was reminded that God had not forgotten Judah. He rested in faith in the promise that God would work out his loving purposes in His own way and in His own timing.

3. *Habakkuk Questions, Waits, and Chooses Faith*

At the end of the book Habakkuk concluded:

I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:16-19)

How do we be like Habakkuk and find our strength in God? How do we get those feet of a deer that will enable us to traverse the rocky terrain of life and take us ever higher and deeper into the heart of God? Like Habakkuk we take our questions to God and lay them out. We pour out our hopes, fears, dreams, and darkest secrets. Like Habakkuk, we wait. We structure the rhythm of our lives so we have daily spaces to listen to God. There is a devotional reflection sheet in your bulletin. Sit down this afternoon and let God meet you in this time. We have daily devotional guides, “These Days,” in the foyer for you to take home. There are even devotional websites like Our Daily Bread [<http://www.rbc.org/odb/odb.shtml>]

Finally, like Habakkuk, we chose to live in faith, not fear. We read and reread the promises of God. We memorize, repeat, and even sing those words of promise that will remind us of what is really true. We gather together weekly to declare what is true. I would like to use that last passage in Habakkuk as a declaration of our faith. We will read together today and I encourage you to use it often on your own. Read it out aloud with me:

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,*

- *though the stock market falls*
- *though the earthquakes, fires, and hurricanes come*
- *though my bills are getting higher*
- *though my health continues to fail*
- *though my relationships are strained*
- *though violence has spread across the globe*

yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

*The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to go on the heights.*