

Who We Worship

Habakkuk 3:1-19

August 15, 2010

The last word we heard was from God declaring that He is in His Holy Temple and the world is to keep silence before Him. It was a call to quiet dependance and trust in God. Whatever God's actions, we have no call to accuse Him of wrongdoing because He is always faithful to keep His word. It is our sin and rejection of His ways that brings heartache and destruction on us. This world, and we ourselves, are not the way He created us and the fault is ours and ours alone.

This morning's text is a song of **prayer**. We know this because Habakkuk identifies it as a prayer, but it is written like a song. Indeed he says at the end that it is for the director of music and is to be played on his instruments. It is a song of praise and celebration of God for who He is and what He has done. This is especially important when we remember that Habakkuk was a prophet to Judah toward the end of their existence as a nation. They had rejected God, choosing instead to live and worship like the people around them. Their end was coming and it was being brought about by God Himself. God had become their enemy because of their continuing refusal to be His people. It is in the midst of this crisis, generated by the nation of Judah, that Habakkuk offers this prayer.

Before we get into the meat of the prayer we need to look at a couple of terms. We don't know what shigionoth is. It only occurs in the Bible twice in two different forms. It may be a literary term to identify the type of prayer Habakkuk means. It may be a musical

term to identify the tune or even the instrument. Similarly, in the middle of verse 3 we find the term, "selah." As with shigionoth, we are not really certain what this means, though we find it a lot in the Psalms. It is generally considered to be a musical instruction meaning something like "pause."

Habakkuk's prayer begins with a prayer I pray on a regular basis. *"LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy."* (v.2) Verse two is a call to God in praise and recognition of what He has done in the past, and a request to renew His activity in the present. Habakkuk is asking God to move again on behalf of His people and to remember mercy even as He pours out His wrath.

It seems every generation needs a movement of **God**. We have a very short memory. We always hear jokes about teenagers thinking they know better than their parents, and there is some truth to it. It is just like our relationships with God. We get a little knowledge and quickly think we have moved past Him. We rely too much on our experiences and the things that happen to us than we do on what we have been taught by the people who have come before us. There is ancient wisdom that we would do well to learn. The people of Judah knew the ancient stories, but they didn't learn from them. They knew what God had done in the past, but they didn't change their attitudes toward Him because of it.

Habakkuk, however, remembered what God had done and was awed by it. He took the accounts of God's activity in the past, and of the promises He had made for good and ill, to heart and believed that God was real and

was able to do those things again. He prayed that God would again move on behalf of His people, though He knew God's mercy would be limited because of their sin.

Habakkuk outlined the deeds of God and remembered what He has done. We do not have time to go into detail on all the things that Habakkuk calls to our minds. The setting for his prayer is God's rescue of His people from slavery in Egypt.

It begins with the statement, "God **came**." We need to stop right there for a moment. This is a remarkable declaration in itself. The Old Testament writers often said that God came. In fact, it is usually the fact that God comes to His people rather than them going to Him. It is God that initiates their relationship with Him. It is God that reaches down to us because we have no real inclination in ourselves to reach out to Him. We want His help. We want His mercy. We do not want Him as He is in all of His holiness, majesty, splendor, and power. We want His gifts, but not His authority over us. Yet God still comes. He reaches out and calls those He will. He sends His Spirit to draw His people to Himself.

When God comes, things happen. His glory comes with Him. Again, the church has come to think of this glory as a warm, comfortable presence and assurance of God's love for us. God does love those He saves, but His glory is never comfortable. It shines like the sun. It burns away all that is not pleasing to Him. It forces even the Apostles, those closest to Jesus, to their knees. This is the description Habakkuk gives of God's glory when He comes.

God also brings His judgement. The judgement in the Exodus was against Egypt. You will remember that God rescued the people out of Egypt with a series of ten plagues. They started off designed to show God's power over the supposed gods of the Egyptians. He struck the Nile river on which the county depended. He brought disease on people and livestock. Still, the Pharaoh would not relent to release the Hebrews.

God's presence also brings earthquakes, especially His coming in wrath. When God arrived on Mount Sinai to deliver the law to Moses, the mountain shook. When Jesus died on the cross the earth shook. Look with me at Matthew 27, verses 50 and 51: "*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.*" When God shows up the earth, and the nations who are on it, tremble.

Even the water is affected. We have already noted God's attack on the Nile river. Remember also that He parted the Red Sea to finalize the escape from Egypt, and later parted the Jordan river to bring the next generation into the land He had promised their ancestors. God is not just the God of Canaan. He is not even just the God of the land. God is the God of the waters too. There is **nothing** outside of God's control or dominion. The storms are His to command and the most violent of storms only do His bidding.

Habakkuk reminds us that God's power and activity are not limited to this planet, either. The sun and moon also obey His will. They stop at His command. You will remember, as Habakkuk did, the battle against

the Amorites during which God stopped the sun and the moon in order to give His people victory. There is nothing, on earth or in the entire universe, that is outside of God's command.

Only the human **heart** resists God. It is this resistance that leads Him to walk the earth in anger and righteous judgement beating the nations in order to knock loose that which has no value so that what is good might remain and grow. We often see these violent images of God in the Bible and think to ourselves, "I could never worship a god like that." We must remember however, first, that all our suffering is deserved. No matter how good we think we are, we deserve nothing good from God's hand. If we think we do then we just haven't understood our sin and the depth of our depravity.

The second thing we must always remember is that God never punishes without an end result in mind. He satisfies justice, but He also punishes to redeem and rescue His people from oppression. They may be oppressed by other people. They may be oppressed by their own sin and sinful behavior. Still, God acts to rescue them and call them back to Himself. He destroys, but not completely. He clears away that which is no good so that His people can be who He wants them to be. He is a loving and redeeming God toward His people, even when He moves in wrath and punishment.

As God brought His people through the wilderness the nations before them were afraid. Some sought to trick them into making peace with them, with some success. Most gathered their armies together and sought to fight them off. Only sin in Israel allowed their

enemies to win. God's wrath was poured out on those people who would not acknowledge Him and insisted on their own way. He came out to deliver those He had set apart for His purposes and to be His people. God gave His people victory.

All of this rehearses God's power and His authority over the earth. As we have seen, there is nothing outside of God's power. Time and again, already in Habakkuk's day, God had displayed His might and power to His people and their enemies. As the Creator of all that is and of all the power in the universe, we should not be surprised that God is not **limited**. Habakkuk realized this.

Verse 16 begins Habakkuk's response to God's deeds, and to the replies God had made to the people's complaints. *"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."* Habakkuk was afraid of God's action. Even as God's prophet he trembled in fear and felt faint because of what he saw coming. Yet he did not give up hope. Notice he was waiting for calamity to fall on those who would win, on the nation invading Judah.

Habakkuk's right and proper response was to wait patiently for God to fulfill His **purposes**, even if Habakkuk never saw that fulfillment. As the apostle Paul reminds us, we walk by faith, not by sight. The promises of scripture are to be more valuable to us than what our eyes see. This is not some superstitious trust in something that does not exist (as some would have us believe). It is trust in the God who has revealed Himself

and His power throughout history and in our lives and midst. In their times of greatest distress, perhaps because everything else is gone, God's people have always relied on what they know to be true about Him in spite of what is going on around them. We see Job crying out that he will trust God even if God kills him. Habakkuk's prayer here offers a similar thought.

Look at verses 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.”* Even if the world falls apart, Habakkuk said he would still trust God and find his strength in his Sovereign. What an remarkable affirmation of faith! Can we say that even if our lives were to collapse, if everything that we can imagine going wrong went wrong, we would still be joyful in God because He is our Savior? Why do we expect lives of leisure and so many good things from His hand when what He wants most of all is to give us Himself and have us take our pleasure in Him? Why do we require all these other things from Him?

Habakkuk said he could be destitute and starving and yet he would rejoice in the Lord. Oh to have that heart! Oh that God's people would take that attitude today so that there would be nothing we would not give up, nothing we would not set aside, in order to know God and be of use to Him!

The church today is called to be God's people, to live the way He wants us to live, to do the things He wants us to do, but most of all to love Him more than we love anyone or anything else. The Christian life is not about behavior and doing better than we did the day before. It is about acknowledging that God is God, He has a charge against us, and He has chosen in His grace and mercy to forgive us if we are in Christ. Changed behavior is the result of the Spirit working in our hearts and lives, not some self-help work that we do.

Because of this we have hope. No matter how bad things seem to be we know that **God** is in control and what He wills is going to happen. He is faithful. He make take everything away, but we are left with this powerful promise penned by the Apostle Paul:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)