

On Him we have set our hope that He will deliver us again

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

A sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

The great British poet John Milton begins *Paradise Lost* with the question: How do we explain the ways of God to man? How do we explain the terrible things, the tragedies, accidents, devastating floods, and illnesses? How can we justify the ways of God to man? That is the problem for anyone who seriously looks at life.

Habakkuk takes up this question. Habakkuk 1:4: "The law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted." This problem is presented again and again in Scripture. Jeremiah 12:1-2: "Why do the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" Psalm 73:2-3: "I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as other men are." In Isaiah 6:11 the prophet asks: "How long, O Lord?"

Habakkuk raised this question. He went up into a high tower to try to see what God was doing. Would the Lord take care of this terrible evil? The answer was: The Lord is acting and now is the time to wait for it. Then comes the famous verse: "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4. See also Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38.)

Other places have a different message, like Psalm 37:25: "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread. He is ever giving liberally and lending, and his children become a blessing." That's not the way it is! Rather, there are all kinds of righteous, good people. They are done in.

To set the problem in a larger context: Matthew 5:45: "He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." How can the Lord do that? It doesn't seem to work out. There is no justice. Evil triumphs, and the good fails.

God doesn't seem to be in charge. As they said in the Eighteenth Century: Did he just wind the earth up like a clock and then go away and let it all go to pieces?

There are two ways this dilemma is approached. There is "our way." When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we subconsciously think: "My kingdom come. My will be done." There are three ways we do that.

First, we want what others have. There was a great prophet named Samuel. He grew old. The people expected that there would be another prophet. They had been led by such prophets for centuries. In 1 Samuel 8:19-20 it says they came to him and said: No, we want a king. We want a king like other people.

The kings began with Saul, then David, and all the troubles of being like the other nations came, too. Habakkuk wrote about 600 B.C., and it was a time when there had been terrible idolatry under King Manasseh. After him there was a reformer named King Josiah, but he still practiced idolatry. Habakkuk is asking: How long, O Lord? How can you let this happen?

Second, we can be lulled into thinking every religion saves. A recent poll reports that 80% of American Christians hold that all religions lead to salvation. The 80% means that it's not just mainline Christians who think this, but also Pentecostals and Baptists. That means that only 20% would say, "No, in Christ alone is salvation."

But no matter what, we are "unworthy," each of us. We recall that little parable in Luke 17:7-10 about the slave who works and even when he has done everything, he is still unworthy: "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

Third, there are those who say that evil is only in our minds. Not just Christian Science, but the whole religion of Buddhism, 400 million of them, for whom all distinctions, even the distinction between myself and the outer world, are illusions. There are also many people who say, "What's the problem with evil? It's just a kind of false thinking."

But over against our way is the Lord's way. The Lord says he is taking care of sin and evil. There are great promises. Hebrews 11:13: "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."

It's like driving toward a far-off mountain range. You think you when arrive at that mountain range, you will be at the tallest mountain, but as you get closer, you find that first there are the foothills and only after several hundred more miles of driving do you reach the peak of the mountain range.

The Lord makes his promises and the people of Old Testament looked to his salvation from afar. "He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 5:26). Like whistling for horses and they come galloping.

Isaiah 59:10 is a striking picture: "We grope for the wall like the blind, we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men. . . . We look for justice, but there is none; for salvation but it is far from us." Then to verse 15: "The Lord saw it and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him." (You may recall how that is set to music in Handel's Messiah.)

The Lord then does it. He brings judgment and also hope. That hope is found already in Isaiah 49:14-15: "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' 'Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, I will not forget you.'"

Habakkuk 3:17-19: "Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the oil fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds' feet, he makes me tread upon my high places."

The Lord acts. The Lord acts for us. We remember the key verse: "The just shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). That is stated another way in Isaiah 50:10: "Who among you fears the Lord . . . and relies upon his God?"

We go forward because it is the Lord acting, not because we understand or we sort it out. After Christ came and the cross and resurrection had changed everything, Paul wrote: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:28-29).

That is: We can depend on him. He is working. His promises are different because they never fail. We can't understand it. Obviously the people of Israel lost their land. They lost their temple. They lost many of their people. Not just once but they lost everything again to Rome in the First Century.

"The just shall live by faith," Habakkuk 2:4 says. (Remember that is repeated in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38.) This promise is fulfilled in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "All the promises of God find their Yes in him." And in 2 Cor 1:8-10:

"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so greatly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

Amen