

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 2, 2017

## **Yet I Will Rejoice**

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 3:16-19

I just returned yesterday evening  
from spending a week as volunteer chaplain at the presbytery camp  
where my daughter Langley is working this summer.  
The camp is up in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania,  
so it's good to be back where I don't feel self-conscious every time I say "y'all,"  
which, it turns out, is a lot!

Going from camp-related biblical themes back to the Minor Prophets  
is a bit jarring!  
Probably much as it is for any of you  
returning from a week of basking in the sunshine on the beach.  
These are definitely bible readings for grown-ups!

I know that you were in capable hands last week in the Adult Summer Series  
reading Nahum with Gwen Randolph,  
and Allen McSween has just finished teaching an excellent class  
on Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

Keeping up with the Twelve Minor Prophets can be daunting,  
there being so many of them,  
but as we've been charting them on a timeline this summer  
we've seen how they line up in groups of three.

The groups of three correspond to Isaiah in the 8th century,  
Jeremiah in the 7th century, and Ezekiel in the 6th century.

Like Isaiah,  
the Minor Prophets Hosea, Amos, and Micah  
preached in the 8th century  
in the days leading up to the Assyrian's destruction of Samaria,  
the capital of North Israel.

And like Jeremiah,  
the Minor Prophets Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah,  
preached in the 7th century  
in the days between when Assyria collapsed,  
only to be replaced by Babylon as the world's next superpower,  
and even more treacherous than the Assyrians had been.

And like Ezekiel  
the Minor Prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,  
preached in the 8th century  
in the days after the Exile to Babylon,  
after Babylon's dominance gave way to the Persians,  
and Cyrus allows the people to return to their homeland.

Then the other three, Jonah, Obadiah, and Joel —  
well, they are more difficult to locate in history but share many similar themes.  
For more help in deciphering these,  
I'll invite you once again to the Summer Series classes in the Fellowship Hall  
on Sunday mornings.

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So today we have heard from Habakkuk,  
as the book says of itself in the opening verse,  
*the oracle Habakkuk saw.*

The Hebrew word we translate as *oracle* literally means “to raise up,” or “to lift up,”  
and can also be understood as a burden that is lifted upon the shoulders:  
*the burden Habakkuk saw.*

As we listen to Habakkuk, we find that it is indeed a burden that he carries.

Just prior to Habakkuk,  
Nahum had prophesied in the time Brueggemann calls  
“the nanosecond of glee between the fall of Assyria  
and the rise of Babylon...”

But now it is left to Habakkuk to bring a word from the Lord,  
in the days when the people are living under the ominous shadow  
of the Mighty Babylon  
lurking just over the horizon to the North.

These are days of acute anxiety  
as the people dread the horrors about to come upon them.  
And the prophet has the unenviable task  
of preaching that it is the Lord, the God of Israel,  
who is raising up the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans)  
to bring judgment upon God's people.

God is using the Babylonians, working through them, to execute judgment,  
*that fierce and impetuous nation,  
who march through the breadth of the earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.  
... Their horses are swifter than leopards,  
more menacing than wolves at dusk...  
...they fly like an eagle swift to devour.  
They all come for violence,  
with faces pressing forward;  
they gather captives like sand.*

Surely the fear and dread were terrible enough already,  
but now the prophet makes it clear that  
not only can Israel expect no help from God,  
but it is, in fact, the Lord himself who is at work through the Babylonians  
to bring this judgment on Israel.  
Not a very happy message to deliver.

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But now Habakkuk has a problem.  
He has a problem because he sees that  
while the people of Israel may deserve the judgment being brought upon them  
because of their many sins and injustices,  
the nation God is using as an instrument of judgment  
is no better and is in fact an even worse offender against God's justice  
that Israel has been.

So, in protest, the prophet cries out,  
*Are you not from of old,  
O Lord my God, my Holy One?  
... Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,  
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;  
why do you look on the treacherous,  
and are silent when the wicked swallow  
those more righteous than they?*

The world has gone to hell in a hand basket,  
and the prophet feels compelled to point this out in prayer to God  
even as he announces the coming destruction.

Habakkuk is dealing here  
with a perennial problem for people of faith.  
How can we look around  
and see rampant injustice and the apparent success of evildoers,  
and still maintain our belief in a just God?

“The challenge of believing in the ultimate power of justice  
in a world that appears to be overwhelmingly unjust  
is one of the most difficult existential struggles the [person of faith] must face.”<sup>1</sup>

We have further evidence of this pervasive problem of faith  
in the fact that the most common type of Psalm in the Hebrew Psalter  
is the Psalm of Lament,  
in which the psalmists cry out to God bring order to the world  
and to rectify the wrongs that have brought suffering and misfortune  
upon God's people.<sup>2</sup>

For Habakkuk, the abuses inflicted by a superpower on the weaker nations around it proves that the traditional biblical theology of rewards and punishments does not work itself out in people's actual lives.

**In the face of such ambiguity and disorder in the world,  
is it possible to believe in divine justice?**

So the Lord answers the prophet:

*Write the vision;*

*make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it*

[or as the NIV says, *so that a herald may run with it.*]

*For there is still a vision for the appointed time;*

*it speaks of the end, and does not lie.*

*If it seems to tarry, wait for it;*

*it will surely come, it will not delay.*

*Look at the proud!*

*Their spirit is not right in them*

*but the righteous shall live by their faith.*

[Or perhaps, *by their faithfulness.*]

The prophet's message in the face of unresolved injustice is simply this:

**Don't stop believing.**

**Never give up.**

**Never give up on God's justice.**

The fact that you recognize that the spirit of the proud is not right within them, is a sign that you still hold on to a vision of God's justice.

In the day you stop recognizing and being appalled by the arrogance of the proud then you need to worry,

because then, you have stopped living by faith.

Still, it is not easy to remain faithful to the vision of God's justice when only injustice can be seen all around, when the powerful flaunt their power and call it good, when the deceitful tell their lies and call it truth.

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By the time Jesus came along

the people of Israel suffered under the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and finally, the Romans.

When Jesus' disciples saw just how hard it can be to hold on to faith,

and when faced with the sin and hypocrisy of even their own brothers and sisters in the faith community,

*they said to the Lord,*

*'Increase our faith!'*

*The Lord replied,  
‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,  
you could say to this mulberry tree,  
Be uprooted and planted in the sea’,  
and it would obey you.*

Jesus will not let his disciples get away with merely whining that the world is a terrible place, that they are victims of injustice, and that the people all around them are hypocrites.

Jesus says to his disciples:

**Faith is possible. And it is powerful.  
And it is available to you.**

In the end,

Habakkuk issues a call to such faith,  
to look around and behold the dismal realities,  
and to sense in the midst of the darkness  
that there is yet light,  
there is yet a God,  
a God who is just, and merciful,  
and will prevail over the chaos.

So the prophet offers an answer to the tarrying of the vision.

**If the vision tarries, he will wait for it.  
He will wait for the Lord.**

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls...*

*yet... I will rejoice...*

*yet... I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

May we have such faith, such faithfulness,  
in the many ways we must wait...  
...for the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Hiebert, "Habakkuk" in *New Interpreters Bible, Volume VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 624.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.