

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
October 2, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The Wednesday morning men's group has slowly but steadily been working its way through much of the Old Testament for many, many months. In fact, we have finally completed our reading of the books of the 12 Minor Prophets – can anyone name them? Well, here they are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Habakkuk. And of course, if there are 12 “minor” prophets there must be some “major” prophets and indeed there are three of them: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. And perhaps after hearing all this you are wondering, why does this all really matter? Or even, what is a prophet? Well, those are both excellent questions. A prophet was one called by God to, in most cases, see a vision of the future and also to deliver a message to God's people or perhaps, in the case of Jonah, to one of Israel's enemies announcing God's coming judgement due to the people's sinful nature and their failure to continue in the covenantal relationship God had created with them.

As the men slowly meandered through these Minor Prophets the first question above, “Why does any of this (i.e., Old Testament) really matter?” was posed several times and truthfully probably in the minds of all gathered. Take the case of Habakkuk, our first lesson today. This is the only time in the three-year lectionary cycle that we get

a reading from this Minor Prophet. It's a short book – only three chapters long. We know virtually nothing about Habakkuk other than the fact he was active sometime in the late seventh century BCE or roughly 2,600 years ago. The book reflects the struggles of Judah, which is the southern kingdom after Israel divided leaving Israel as the northern kingdom. These struggles consisted of several things. First, their King, Josiah, had died and he had been instrumental in reforming the Temple in Jerusalem, returning justice, proper Temple worship, and adherence to the law back to Judah. In the wake of his death and the short-lived succession of his sons things seemed to return to the ways of old. Habakkuk, in his opening dialogue with God, seems to give us some insight into those struggles as is written, "Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails." Habakkuk was witnessing injustice, corruption, violence, and evil right in the midst of his very own society. But it wasn't only this, he was also living in a time when super powers threatened Judah from all directions and the biggest one of his day was just gaining power, Babylon of whom would soon start to deport the people of Judah into exile. And so what does Habakkuk do? He laments.

Something not unusual in the Bible. He lays his heart on the line in prayer to God. He is not afraid to confront God with hard questions, anger, despair, and even a charge against God for simply sitting by and doing nothing. Habakkuk's is the old age question, "How can God simply sit by and do nothing?" "How can evil continue to run

rampant?” “How can the wicked continue to prosper and the righteous; that is, those who adhere to God’s will, suffer unjustly?” He utters a prayer on behalf of the people. So, getting back to the question, why does this matter?

It matters because here we sit all those years later and so often come with that very same question. Which of us isn’t deeply grieved each time another bomb explodes on a crowded street? Which of us isn’t moved to tears when another child is lost in a senseless shooting? Which of us doesn’t stand horrified as terrorists continue to strike time and time again and we wonder just where in the world is God? Which of us isn’t outraged each time another act of racism, bigotry, or hatred goes unpunished? Which of us doesn’t struggle as millions of children go to bed hungry each and every night? Which of us doesn’t come this morning with something happening in our own lives that moves us so deeply that we wrestle to comprehend why this has happened and just where in the world is God at? This is what Habakkuk is wrestling with. This is why he is pleading with God. This is why this matters to us all these years later because in turbulent times, in a chaotic and unpredictable world, in a world in which evil, greed, wealth, power, and unscrupulous business practices seem to rule the day the church continues to ponder its place in the all of this and those very same questions Habakkuk poses in his prayer. The people of God continue to long for God’s justice to be delivered. While things have changed so much since Habakkuk’s cry things still remain so much the same.

And the church needs the reply Habakkuk gets. We need to hear the promise God is not absent. God isn't silent. God does hear our prayer. God will come to the aid of God's people. It may not be on our time frame. It may not come how we expect it to come. God responded but on God's terms. Habakkuk had to wait. He had to keep watch. He had to listen. Sometimes that is all we can do with those hard questions, those struggles, those prayers we raise to God. We simply have to be patient and have faith that God hears them. Yet, other times we do have to ask another important question to God – move beyond the why and move toward the “What or How.” “What can we do God to be your hands, voice, and partner in helping alleviate the suffering?” “How might you use us to speak out for justice?” We are given the freedom to ask the “why” questions and even to be angry with God but we must then allow the Spirit to move us beyond those fears, anger, frustrations, struggles, doubts and trust the faith we have been given, even if we deem it miniscule, to be enough to move us to action.

Why does this passage matter? It matters because it opens up the ongoing need for God's salvation. It moves us to confront our own participation in systemic orders set in place that we knowingly or unknowingly contribute to, which foster injustice or further place burden upon the poor, marginalized, and “least of those” in society. It moves us to look toward the cross where we find a God that didn't sit idly on the sideline. It moves us to Jesus Christ – God incarnate, God with us, God who met the world in the horror, evil, injustice, and corruption. God who didn't respond to evil with

a sword but rather God who suffered with and for the world. God who bore the weight of sin on the cross. God who rose victorious through the resurrection. God who through Jesus Christ, gives the very same eternal promise God spoke to Habakkuk all those years ago and to us gathered this very day, God is still sovereign and in God's way and at God's proper time justice will prevail, the light will conquer the darkness, and the sheep of God's pasture will live eternally with the Good Shepherd.