

comes from and who is our ultimate saviour is.

And this is where this passage gives us a mission. If the answer to the world's evil is right worship of God, then what must we do? If standing in awe before God's for he is truly righteous then we've got work to do. For as God's worshipping community grows so will God's ways – the kingdom of God grows one believer at a time. And that's why the church's most important work is not doing fundraisers or acting like a service club, but the most important work we do is proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and living it out in sin sick world.

Because what is God doing up in that holy temple? Is he fretting and worrying? No. Is he pulling his hair out in despair about how bad things are getting? No. God is moving his chess pieces one at a time, taking into account both our human hearts that are inclined toward pride and greed, and God's plans for a whole new world where peace and love reign.

And for us, God's ultimate answer to the problem of pride and greed is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is not about what we do, but about what Jesus Christ has done for us in our sin. In our natural proclivity to build ourselves up and to gain more for ourselves Jesus saved the world in a different way.

Paul writes in Philippians, "Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

In other words, Jesus didn't pursue his own glory and his own wealth, but he

emptied himself of both for the sake of the world that God loved so much. And as a result, Jesus took our shame so that when we believe in him, the Father clothes you in the honour that Jesus deserved.

You see, when we seek our own honour and wealth the world turns evil. But we don't need to seek after these things because God gives us both – not because we deserve them but because Jesus did.

The gospel says the problem of the world is my sin, but the answer is God's free grace. You can't be proud and greedy in the face of that ultimate truth.

That truth has the power to disarm my hearts natural inclination toward pride and greed. It has the power to disarm me and to disarm my culture.

And so, Habakkuk tells us, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." God sees the workings of the human heart and see how it manifests itself in the form of evil in the world. But God is still in control. God will not be stumped.

And God has given us a mission, to disarm the world not with force or with global treatise or agreements, or but with the disarming power of Jesus Christ, who comes humble and poor to transform not just our politics, but our hearts.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Right on Time: A Culture Gone Sideways"***

*February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Habakkuk 2*

*By Rev. Mike Putnam*

So, last week we started this series about how to face evil times. We talked about how the world isn't necessarily moving in a constant state upward, but it's more like cycles of evil and good and sometimes both at once.

And last week we saw Habakkuk, this Old Testament minor prophet, call God to account for the evil he saw in his time. Because if God is in charge, then why is there evil? If God is all powerful, then why do people still suffer?

And what was God's answer to Habakkuk? "You think it's bad now, I'm about to make it worse." Which doesn't sound very encouraging! God is sending the full weight of Babylonian army to bear on the people of Israel. How can anything good come from that?

But the problem isn't that God isn't good, or that God doesn't know what he's doing, the problem is our lack of perspective. We can't see it. We can't see how God will use the evil that exists in the world to accomplish his good ends. Because sometimes it feels like we're suffering needlessly, when God has a plan for our times of difficulty.

Today, God continues to speak to Habakkuk, telling him in some detail, about the evil in the Babylonian culture. He's sending the Babylonians to overtake Israel, but God isn't deceived. He knows exactly what he's dealing with, and he knows what their problems are.

God says to Habakkuk, in essence, "Take notes, I'm about to tell you exactly what it is that makes the Babylonian culture evil." And in this chapter we find two very

helpful principles for facing our own evil times. Because evil times can be weathered so long as you know these two essential things.

First, God wants us to understand the source of the evil – what is it that makes the Babylonian culture evil? And second, God wants us to know the antidote to it. And when we're clear on these two things they give us both a comfort to help us face the evil and a mission to defeat it.

So first, the source of the evil. Because we're always looking for someone to blame, aren't we. Some will say the problem is the greedy business capitalists, while others will say the problem is restrictive government policies and interference. While others will say the problem is the darned liberals wasting our tax money and making social changes that are out of touch with most of the country. Or others will say the problem is all those conservative minded folks who are trying to keep us back in the dark ages. But someone is to blame. And, of course, it is those other people.

But interestingly the Bible doesn't say that. The Bible doesn't see the problems of the world in that way. The Bible always sees the problems of the world on a micro level – the level of the heart. Sure, there's systemic and social levels of evil but it originates in the hearts of ordinary human beings.

And what does God say the problem is? Let's look at the text. God says, "See the enemy is puffed up...he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied. He gathers to himself all the nations and

takes captive all the peoples.” That’s the problem with the Babylonian culture: pride and greed.

And those are two problems of the heart, aren’t they? The Babylonians are trying to glorify themselves and gain for themselves what does not belong to them. But are these unusual human traits? Only a problem 2500 years ago in a land far away? Have we overcome these problems? No, they are the very same challenges we face today.

And so, firstly, the problem is pride. God says, “See the enemy is puffed up.” He is prideful. Anyone here have a little pride in their hearts? Pride is the most common sin in our hearts, but on a national level and pride really becomes dangerous.

And then the next problem God identifies is greed. God says, “Because he is greedy as the grave and like death never satisfied.” Anyone here want a little more? Feeling unsatisfied with what you have? It’s a natural human inclination – we’re inclined to be in pursuit of more. But again, on a national level greed becomes even more violent and destructive.

My point is that evil isn’t something external to us - it isn’t something in someone else at work somewhere else - it’s in our hearts. We all have the potential to participate in evil systems and structures because of our heart’s inclinations toward pride and greed.

A famous author once wrote, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

So how do nations turn evil? How

do times get bad? It’s a function of the dysfunction of the human heart being harnessed by the culture. And that’s why the answer to the world’s problem can never be simply systematic, it can never be a policy or an international action. The real answer, if it is to be truly effective, always has to be on the heart level.

And that’s why Jesus Christ is God’s answer to evil. Because his actions have cosmic implications – his death on a cross where he bore the full weight of the world’s evil and suffering upon himself – so that we wouldn’t have to - is a cosmic action. But it affects us on the heart level – requiring a personal decision for each of us. Jesus isn’t interested in politics he’s interested in hearts – one at a time – because that’s the only way to truly change the world.

And so now, God goes on for the rest of the chapter to detail the natural outflow of this heart level pride and greed that is the problem with the Babylonian culture. What’s the result of this heart dysfunction on a cultural level? God gives us five categories – or five “woes”.

“Woe to him who piles up stolen goods...” The first thing that happens when a culture is prideful and greedy is injustice. They have taken what does not belong to them and it has cost life, destroyed lands and leveled cities.

Next God says, “Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin.” What’s this “woe” about? The Babylonians are attempting to give themselves security. But its ill-gotten security. They’re taking lands and resources that don’t belong to them in order to shore up security to weather disaster or attack. Instead of trusting God for their security they’re taking it for themselves.

Next God says, “Woe to him to builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town with injustice” In other words, the Babylonian’s social policy is cruelty. How do they get it done? In any way they can, no matter the impact on others.

Next God says, “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbours pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk”. Immorality. The godless culture of the Babylonians has no higher calling, no sense of right and wrong. They do what they want when they want – no one tells them otherwise.

And finally, God says, “Woe to him who says to wood “Come to life! Or to a lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give you guidance?” – Idolatry. God says the problem with pride and greed in your heart is you will want to make gods of your own who affirm you as you are and ask nothing more of you.

We can look at evil times and say “How on earth did we get here? How on earth did it get this bad?” How did Nazi Germany ever get so powerful and so evil? How did Pol Potts Cambodia ever get that way? How did Putin’s Russia turn so dark? The answer is pride and greed in the human heart. It’s already there just waiting to be given a platform for legitimacy.

And God says the natural result is fivefold: injustice, ill-gotten security, cruelty, immorality, and idolatry. But pride and greed are at the root of it all. Pride and greed are the sources of all that drives evil in the world in the past, in the present and in the future.

A terrible show that I got watching a few years ago, too late at night after everyone has gone to bed, was the HBO series called Breaking Bad. I’m not recommending it, but it has fascinated me on a certain level. Because it’s about a descent hard working high school chemistry teacher who finds out he has cancer, and he

wants to look after his wife and unborn child – provide for them should he die. So, he ends up getting hooked up with this high school dropout who makes and sells crystal meth, and he starts cooking it with him.

How did this happen? It’s complicated. But essentially it was his own pride – the kid wasn’t doing it right. This chemistry teacher was prideful and knew he could do it better. And it was his own greed – he wanted more money than what he could earn for himself.

All he wants to do is look after his family, but this khaki and plaid shirt wearing high school chemistry teacher ends up working for a notorious Mexican drug cartel producing high quality meth. And Murder and bloodshed are the natural outcome even as the money flows to the point he’s hiding it under his floorboards and in his walls, and later buys a car wash to launder it.

This is how it happens. This is the evil power of pride and greed in our hearts. And it naturally can be extrapolated to a community and even national level.

So, what’s the antidote? Can anything be done? Is the proclivity of the human heart too strong to be dealt with? Well, God gives us one line in Habakkuk’s prophesy as the antidote. He gives us one little gleam of hope. “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent.”

In other words, Babylon isn’t in control. Babylon doesn’t claim authority over the cosmos. No, God is in control and in charge. And in our time, I know it feels like China, and Russia and America call the shots, but God isn’t MIA, he is in his holy temple.

The answer to a nation out of control is awe and silence before a holy God. The answer is right worship. The answer is having some perspective on where evil