

writing as they face their tragic circumstances he says,

"In noting down our wants and difficulties, I would not conclude without expressing my thanks to the God of all mercies for the grace He has bestowed on each of my suffering companions, who, with the utmost cheerfulness, endure all without a murmur, patiently awaiting the Lord's time to deliver them, and ready, should it be His will, to languish and die here, knowing that whatever He shall appoint shall be well. My prayer is that the Lord may be glorified in me, whatever it may be, by life or death, and that He will, should we fall, send forth other labourers into this harvest, that His name may be magnified, and His kingdom enlarged, in the salvation of multitudes from among the inhabitants of this land..."

Jesus says, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The great eighteenth century pastor, Jonathan Edwards delivered his first sermon at the age of 18. He wrote on the topic of Christian happiness. He argued that Christians should be people notable for their joy – no matter what. What were his reasons for this?

Because we're luckier? Because bad things don't happen to us? Because we're stronger people who are better able to overcome times of evil? No, we're no different than anyone else. But even so, we're joyful because we know that our bad things will turn out for good, our good things can never be taken away from us, and the best is yet to come.

Is this true for you? Do you have the capacity to preach to your own heart the truths of the gospel? Do you have the discipline of turning to God's strength in your weakness? Are you able to say, like

Habakkuk, "The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights."?

Listen one more time to another of Allan Gardiner's journal entries. In full light of their tragic circumstances, Gardiner writes, "I pray that in whatsoever state, by His wise and gracious Providence I may be placed, I may therewith be content, and patiently await the development of His righteous will concerning me, knowing that He doeth all things well."

That's the crux of what Habakkuk is saying here. This is the deep end of the pool of faith. This is not for the faint of heart. This is not muscling through our difficulties. This is collapsing in the arms of our saviour – the most faithful posture of all.

This is not good advice about mustering up our strength to endure suffering under our own steam. This is showing faithful collapse in the arms of Jesus – who carries us into an unknown future which turns out to be more glorious and wonderful than anything we might cobble together for ourselves.

Gardiner is right, "He doeth all things well..." And it is in this knowledge that we can face the days ahead, with joy, no matter what.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"The Struggle Is Real – Preaching to Your Own Soul"

February 18th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Habakkuk 3

By Rev. Mike Putnam

Do you talk to yourself?

Anyone here regularly have conversations in your own mind? Or maybe even out loud? What do you say? What's that dialogue like?

Because we know that self-talk is powerful. It has the potential to disable us, but it also has the power to make all the difference in keeping us going.

Great athletes use self-talk to push them on to their goals, to reach beyond their normal capacity to accomplish new heights. But sometimes our negative self-talk can prevent us from even getting out of bed in the morning.

In a 2013 study, scientists studied anorexic women as they walked through their labs — believe it or not, these women, many not much more than skin and bones, would turn their bodies sideways as they passed through doorways, as if they were so overweight, they couldn't fit through the door. This is the power of negative self-talk to alter our sense of reality.

But this morning Habakkuk wants us to know that self-talk is the key to facing our own evil times. He wants us to know that the conversation in our head is a critical component to not only get through evil times but to thrive in the midst of them.

But not self-talk about me. I'm not building myself up in my mind. It's self-talk about the power and majesty of God. That's what Habakkuk wants us to know this morning in our third and final

installment in our "The Struggle Is Real" series.

In 1851 Allan Gardiner was a former Royal Navy Officer turned missionary who was shipwrecked with other missionaries off the tip of South America. They all died of hunger and sickness, and Gardiner was the last one to survive. Dehydrated and starving, he laid himself under a wrecked lifeboat so that he could watch for any potential saving ships on the horizon.

During this time Gardiner kept a journal and it was discovered beside his body when rescuers arrived too late. His journal gives us some insight into Gardiner's self-talk during this time.

Listen to the last entry that Gardiner made in his journal. Quoting Psalm 34:10 he wrote: "Young lions do lack and suffer hunger but they that seek the Lord will not lack any good thing." And Gardner's last words were these: "I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God."

Isn't that something? We say "God is good" mostly when life is good. We say "God is good" when the weather is nice, when we're healthy, when we're wealthy. But who among us is in the practice of reminding our hearts of the goodness of God in the midst of our difficulty, in our tragedy and in our despair?

And yet that's how Habakkuk ends his book on the subject of evil times. Remember we've heard in the first chapter God tell Habakkuk that this

apparent time of suffering is not pointless. God is making everything worse, but he's making it worse for a good purpose.

And in the second chapter we heard God detail what it is that is evil about the Babylonian culture – pride and greed. And that pride and greed was the source of 5 categories of evil action in the world. But the antidote to that evil is the knowledge that “the Lord is in his holy temple and all the earth be silent before him.” The antidote is right worship.

But now Habakkuk wants us to see how we can face our own evil times and still be able to rejoice. Because evil times are not always avoidable. Sometimes you can't go around them, you can't go over them, you can't go under them, you just have to go through them. But Habakkuk wants us to see that as we do, we can still rejoice in the Lord.

How do we do that? Well, let's turn to the text. Habakkuk writes, “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.” And then he goes on for 15 verses to talk about ancient history.

What's he doing? Why this long poetic discourse about the past? Habakkuk is preaching to his own heart. Habakkuk is retelling the story of the gospel as he knows it – the Exodus – the story of the time when Israel was saved by the powerful hand of God.

Look at it again...”God came”...”Plague went before him”...”The ancient mountains crumbled”...”You uncovered your bow”...”You crushed the leader of the land”...”You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters”...

He's talking about the Exodus. Habakkuk is telling himself the story of the Exodus. He's telling the story of how God sent plague after plague, of how the

mountains shook at Mount Sinai, of how the sea split allowing the Israelites to escape and crushed the pursuing Egyptian army.

He's rehearsing the gospel as he knows it. He's reminding himself of God's great deeds in the past. He's reminding himself in living colour of what it means that “God is in his holy temple.”

Okay, so that's how he does it, but now notice when he does it. I'm looking at verse 16 when he says, “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.”

When did he find the joy of the Lord? When everything turned out fine? When God finally answered his prayers? No, in the midst of his suffering. And this is really something when you think about it. Habakkuk is showing us how to not just get by in difficulty, but how to rejoice in the midst of our sorrow.

But rejoicing in the Lord is not just stoicism – it's not facing our difficulties with a stiff upper lip. Habakkuk is weeping and his legs are trembling and yet in the midst of it he has a peace that passes understanding.

You see, that's the strength of our faith. We don't deny our circumstances – this isn't a head game where you block out the suffering. No, it's where you can account for the suffering completely and yet the joy of the Lord happens concurrently with the sorrow.

How does that work? What's happening here? Well, rejoicing in the Lord is not just a feeling. As you repeat what God has done in the past and anticipate what God will do for you in the future, you are given a sense of the transcendence of God over and through your circumstances.

Look at the next section because

this drives the point home. “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.”

What's he saying here? Habakkuk is talking about the complete failure of his investment portfolio. What are fig trees, grapes vines, olives, fields, sheep and cattle? They are the way an ancient person secures his own future. It's a well-diversified investment portfolio – and Habakkuk is anticipating losing it all!

It's the equivalent of stocks and bonds and RRSP's today, and Habakkuk is saying that even though all the ways that he has shored up security for himself may fail, he's still okay. Because his strength is in God not in his circumstances. This is the joy of the Lord.

And you know what's really amazing? Jesus followed Habakkuk's formula for joy in his own suffering. Jesus, dying on a cross, in incredible pain and discomfort quotes scripture. “My God my God why have you forsaken me?” What's Jesus doing? He's quoting the Bible - Psalm 22:1. He's facing his evil time by preaching to his own heart.

But that's only the first line. Psalm 22 begins in a note of despair but it goes on to build to petition – “Do not be far from me for trouble is near and there is no one to help me.” But it doesn't end there either. It goes on to declare victory – “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him.” And it ends with “They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!”

And this is where we might

misunderstand what Habakkuk is saying here. What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? It's not mind over matter. It's not stoicism. It's rejoicing in the one thing that can never be taken from you. It's reminding your heart of God's ultimate victory over sin, sorrow and death. It's treasuring and savouring God for who he is. It's adoring and appreciating and valuing God for who he is and what he has planned for you.

When was the last time you just took some time to consider how rich you are in Christ? Like to just lay in bed staring at the ceiling and ponder what it is you have because of God who comes to us in Jesus Christ?

Habakkuk looked at the Exodus. He reminded his heart about the saving power of God in the past. But we have something he didn't have. We can rejoice not only in how God saved in the past but in the way that God plans to save in the future. And my goodness, that is a sweet thought...

Where does our joy come from no matter our circumstances? Jesus tells us to rejoice that your names are written in heaven. In Luke chapter 10 Jesus says, “However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

See, the disciples have just returned from a missionary journey. They have cast out demons in Jesus' name, and they're pretty excited about it. But Jesus says, don't be happy about that, be happy about your future that is yet to come. He's saying, don't build your identity and your happiness on your abilities – those come and go – but build your identity and your happiness on who God is and what God will do for you. That is eternal – that will never be taken from you.

Listen again to Allan Gardiner back in 1851. This is a bit earlier in his journal,