

You know what's interesting? The apostle Paul actually quotes Habakkuk in the New Testament. He quotes God saying "I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe even if someone told you." (Acts 13:41). What is he referring to? Jesus!

Jesus is God's ultimate answer to the suffering and injustice of the world. But Jesus doesn't look like much of an answer. Jesus – a man dying on a cross – looks like a failure. But in fact, Jesus is God's greatest act of love – God's greatest move in the chess game against evil.

And God's salvation brings light out of darkness. Because Jesus took the judgement we deserve. He entered a violent world as the king of peace.

We look at Jesus and say, "I don't see how a man dying on the cross is going to save the world." But that's just what happened. He was paying our penalty; he bore God's wrath against sin on himself.

But you can see how the people standing in front of the cross said, "How can anything good come of this". And yet now we call it Good Friday. We have no perspective.

So when we feel abandoned and we can't see God doing what we think he should do – we can turn to a book called Habakkuk and know that God's not gone, he's working.

Horatius Bonar – a Scottish pastor grew up singing the psalms. But when he started teaching children about Jesus, he found that they didn't like the tunes or comprehend the words. So, he started writing hymns.

Bonar and his wife faced tragedy in their life. They lost 5 children. But he loved to teach Sunday school and he loved to do it with the songs he wrote. Probably his finest hymn goes like this:

Not what I am, O Lord, but what Thou art;
That, that alone, can be my soul's true rest;
Thy love, not mine, bids fear and doubt depart,
And stills the tempest of my tossing breast.

'Tis what I know of Thee, my Lord and God,
That fills my soul with peace, my lips with song;
Thou art my health, my joy, my staff, my rod;
Leaning on Thee, in weakness I am strong.

In later life, Horatius Bonar's daughter, widowed and came to live with him along with her five children. Horatius said that God gave him back the five he lost with his five dear grandchildren.

When we look at the state of things in our world or even in our own lives it is entirely possible to conclude that God has abandoned us to the uncaring realities of time. The state of the human heart leads us to desire justice but to settle for cheap substitutes instead.

But God is playing the long game. Slow to anger, he moves one piece at a time...taking into account the great sweep of history and his ultimate plans for salvation for each one of us.

It may not make sense on the surface, but in light of God's unrelenting love for you and for me and for all his children, maybe it's the only way. Maybe we can't see it, but God's plan is unfolding exactly as it should.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

"Right on Time: Power in the Memories"

February 4th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Habakkuk 1
By Rev. Mike Putnam

One of the reasons I enjoy reading history is because it gives me some perspective. I'm always fascinated to learn that people don't actually change that much.

I mean sure, our language and our clothes and our hobbies change, but deep down we pretty much remain the same. The things that we think are problems today have largely been problems in the past. People have always been people – complicated and conflicted. History isn't, it turns out a straight line of progress, but more like cycles of good and evil.

There's the old adage that "Those who don't know their history are destined to repeat it." Which is true I suppose, but it also suggests that the saviour of the world is simply more knowledge. But of course, the problem the world faces aren't a lack of knowledge but a disease of the heart – a fatal disease called sin.

And yet the misconception persists that the world is naturally getting better and better. We're making progress! And through technology and education we will advance as a society, and we will essentially create heaven here on earth. Who needs God? We'll get it done. ...But do we?

I understand the hope. It makes sense in a way. Because on the surface it looks possible. We just need to buckle down and try a little harder, get the right people in office, cut taxes, be a little nicer and all the problems of the world will be solved.

And thanks to technology people are living longer. Thanks to education people know more stuff. Thanks to medical science people suffer less. And yet, here we are. Because the underlying problem – the unsolvable problem – is the problem of sin in my heart.

And so, despite all this advancement, this global moment doesn't look all that different from other moments in history. There are wars and rumours of wars, our planet home is in a precarious ecological state, political strife is a

problem everywhere, and here at home poverty is growing, mental health is declining, our healthcare system is buckling and society is failing.

And that's why I've decided to take the next three weeks to study this little obscure book in the middle of the Bible called Habakkuk. I've chosen it because it has a very contemporary application – it's so relevant to us in our time and place.

Because the reality is that there are good times (progress is made economically, socially, and technologically) and then there are evil times (times when we wonder if we'll ever get out of this mess). Times when we despair because "it's 2024 for heaven's sake!" Aren't we supposed to be getting better?

The people of the late 19th century were pretty sure they were finally straightening out the world – things were looking up. But then along came World War I, and the Great Depression, and then World War Two and the Holocaust. They went from times of great progress and hope, into times of sheer evil.

Then following World War Two it seemed the great reconstruction was going to solve the world's problems once and for all. People had hope for peace and stability and social and technological advancement. But then along comes the Cold War, the Vietnam War, social degradation and political strife. And on it goes...the cycles of good and evil continue to this day.

And so, Habakkuk is urgently contemporary. 2500 years after it was written, and it still has much to teach us about ourselves and about God. Because we don't know, we might be heading into evil times. Are you ready? Can you make sense of these times? Do you feel hopeless, and do you despair for how things are? Do you wonder – "Where is God in all of this?"

If so – then this short book – just three chapters long – is a gift from God to give us some perspective.

Habakkuk is one of the minor prophets.

Writing some time before the Babylonian exile, he's observing the problems of his time and he's looking for answers. But unlike other prophets – like Isaiah or Jeremiah - Habakkuk isn't proclaiming God's word to the people but he's having an argument with God.

And so, chapter one is Habakkuk's complaint. God, it seems has let things get out of hand down here on earth. God isn't doing his job – it seems.

"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save." – All I see is evil on the 6 o'clock news. It's not supposed to be this way. It's the year 580 BCE after all!!! So do your Job, God! Time to wake up and start being God again!

Habakkuk lives in an interesting cultural moment. King Josiah has died. Josiah gave the people hope that things were getting better. He was a good king; he obeyed God's law and oversaw a period of prosperity for Israel. But his sons were terrible kings, and they were not following God and things were in decline. And in the midst of this decline, Habakkuk saw God doing nothing about it...

And so, what did he do? He cried out to God in complaint. He was bold and he was honest in his speech. He calls God to account – "Why do you tolerate wrong." He says, "Lord, are you not from everlasting?" This is not a rhetorical statement. He's saying, "I thought you are supposed to be great, wise, and everlasting." So, what's the deal?

And it's interesting that Habakkuk is not approaching God with courtesy or respect here. He's calling God to account. "Why are you letting evil and injustice reign? Why have you let things get worse and not better? I thought you were supposed to be in charge?"

These are bold words. Habakkuk is not scraping in a bow of submission. He's speaking his heart. A heart that yearns for the justice and righteousness of God on earth.

So how does God respond to these accusations? How does he answer Habakkuk? Does he strike him down for questioning his ways? Does he get angry over his insolence?

No, he says I'll tell you why, but you

won't understand it. He says "Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."

God says to Habakkuk, I'll tell you what I'm doing, but you aren't going to like it. Because what I am going to do looks, from your limited perspective, like I'm making everything worse.

That's God's answer to his faithful prophet who desired justice and righteousness! God says, "You think it's bad now, just wait..."

He says, "I am raising up the Babylonians" (this infamous militaristic nation), he says "that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings that are not their own." That's God's answer. That's God's solution to the problems of Israel.

And Habakkuk rightly responds, "are you nuts?" "Have you lost your mind?" "Are you the God we thought you were?"

What is God doing here? Why is God allowing this calamity to be brought on his own people? Why this? Why not some other way? Why not some better technology or a little more education or some free health care? Why not just send a better king? We'd understand that!

Well, history gives us some perspective here. God is setting things up for what will happen next. He is taking his rebellious and unfaithful children; with the very same problem we have – sinful hearts - and he is putting them in "timeout" for a while. But not only that, this is not merely a parent at the end of his rope lashing out in anger. No, God is doing something here that would take two thousand years for us to see.

God is dispersing his people into the diaspora. He is sending synagogues throughout the middle East and the western world. And it is in the synagogues, some historians have argued, that the Jesus' followers would gain their foothold with the gentile Jews around the world.

Because of the Babylonian exile the nation Israel (God's family) was relocated and dispersed. And this would be his platform for the message of Jesus to spread around the world. A message that would not only transform

individuals but that would also transform nations.

Because everywhere that Christianity takes hold – history has shown - nations start to act differently. More peacefully, with more care for the poor, with a social conscience more so than any other society. God was achieving his purposes in the world – but to Habakkuk it looked like God was asleep at the switch.

It reminds me of the Christian church in China. Beginning in the 1920's Christianity began to slowly grow in China because of western missionaries going to share the gospel. But in 1953 China became a communist country and expelled all the missionaries.

And you can imagine how the western Christians responded. It seemed so terrible! Decades of work lost. What was God doing? Why was he turning his back on the Chinese?

But the western Christians couldn't see it. They couldn't perceive what God was doing. Today there are 44 million registered Chinese Christians. Twenty percent of the world's Christians live in China. God wasn't turning his back on China at all. He was making a way for Christianity to flourish under its own steam in a different way.

But we don't have God's perspective. We can't see what's really going on. So, what does this first chapter of Habakkuk teach us about God? What is our takeaway for those living through evil times?

Well, first, notice that Habakkuk never once walks away from God. He doesn't deconstruct his faith. He's not writing books or blogging about how he has boldly become an atheist.

No, he keeps praying. He's wrestling faithfully. And when we get to these times it's okay for us to challenge God too. It's okay to speak frankly and bluntly, in faith. Habakkuk made it into the Bible. God can handle our objections. He gets us!

God knows how we speak when we're desperate. God isn't put off or offended by our desire for the world to be a better place. God shares our desire.

But he also knows that a soundbite answer to our objections isn't going to clear things

up. "Oh yes, thank you Lord, I see that the Babylonian invasion is the best way to accomplish your purposes, thanks for clearing that up for me."

Do you know why God puts up with Habakkuk and his boldness? Any of you ever had a teenager that wasn't 100% polite all the time? Anyone ever had a teenager who stomps around the house, slams bedroom doors, shouts an unkind word in your direction? What do you do? Do you throw them out of the house? No, we say, "Teenagers! One day you'll understand."

And so, God remains God for us even when we're acting like teenagers. God has bound himself to us in a covenantal committed love arrangement – so that even when we can't understand what's happening, we can still count on one thing – God is for us and God is with us, no matter what.

And yet, one of the most significant reasons put forward for not believing in God is "I can't believe in a God that would allow suffering in this world." Suffering is generally the greatest objection to faith.

But when we object to God allowing suffering, we're working on the assumption that we have perfect perspective on it. We're assuming that we know more than we do. God says to Habakkuk, "I'll explain it to you, but you won't understand it...but you don't have to understand it."

Because God doesn't work the way we do. Thank heavens because our methods and plans don't seem to turn out that great.

And so God says I will bring eternal peace out of your inclination for war, I will bring ultimate justice out of your many bad versions of injustice. God says in my kingdom the last are first and the first last. It makes no sense! But we have no perspective.

Imagine playing chess against billions of chess players at once? That's what God is doing. He's moving his pieces carefully weighing every counter move we will make trying to make our own version of God's kingdom, without fully knowing the consequences of our actions. And yet, God is the master chess player. He won't be beat.