

September 6, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, 3:1, 17-19

Message and Scripture: Live by Faith

On such a happy, long-awaited Sunday,
it may seem a little strange to turn to unfamiliar Habakkuk.
It's one of the shortest books in the Old Testament;
In amongst the intimidating 30- and 40-chapter epics,
this one is only three chapters long.
It's not the most cheerful of books,
dealing as it does
with faith
in the midst of hardship.

Yet in Habakkuk's three chapters, there's an amazing transformation;
from deep grief and lament to peace and inner calm,
from the depths of despair to the heights of joy.
From "how long must I call for help, Lord,
before you listen, before you save us from violence?"
to "My Lord gives me strength,
makes me sure-footed as a deer."

And yet, nothing really happens in this book.
Habakkuk isn't delivering a message from God to God's people,
as prophets do.
There's no great journey, from wilderness to safety,
no sudden move from exile to freedom.
The circumstances of Habakkuk's life
don't change at all.
But he does.

This book is about Habakkuk's personal struggle with faith in hard times,
his own relationship with God,
and a turning point in that relationship.

In the first chapter of the book, in the first four verses,
Habakkuk's words of grief and frustration
explain both the problem and his gut reaction to it:
How long, Lord, must I cry for help? But you do not listen!
I call out to you, "Violence!" But you do not deliver!
Why do you force me to witness injustice?
Why do you put up with wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence confront me;
conflict is present and one must endure strife.
For this reason the law lacks power,
and justice is never carried out.
Indeed, the wicked intimidate the innocent.
For this reason justice is perverted.

The problem is easy enough to work out:
no justice, anywhere.

Habakkuk lived and worked as God's prophet
during the final decades of Judah,
the last surviving kingdom of God's people.

The kingdom of Israel had already been conquered
and most of the people taken into exile.
Judah was now under constant pressure from other nations,
lobbed back and forth like a tennis ball
between greater and more powerful kingdoms
as the borders changed
and battles were won and lost.

That international tug-of-war produced internal chaos and,
as Judah's time as an independent nation ended,
they lost their way,
descending into moral and spiritual decay.

Everywhere Habakkuk looked,
he saw people taking advantage of each other,
lying and stealing and cheating;
people hurting each other with swords or words
or money or whatever they had to hand.
What a hard thing for a faithful follower of God
to see in his own nation.

When there is so much wrong, where do you start to make it right?

Well, Habakkuk starts with God.
He questions the way things are,
the way God runs things,
and asks God to give an accounting of the way the world is,
under his sovereign rule.

It's amazing how the more things change,
 the more some things stay exactly the same.
 Habakkuk's words of grief and confused lament
 over the violence and injustice
 and downright wrongness in his world...
 we could easily say the same about our world too.

Perhaps many of us have, these past weeks and months apart.
 Whether it's the sickness and death caused by the virus itself,
 or its effect felt in practically every aspect of our lives,
 or even the usual sorrows and injustices
 of harmful politics, war and unrest,
 poverty and illness...
 ...Habakkuk wanted to know
 where God was in his story.

After the year we've had so far,
 the fear and loss the whole world has experienced...
 ...maybe we'd kind of like to know the same thing.

Because it's one thing to struggle through hard times,
 to live through something difficult and painful and frightening
 while believing there's no one out there, greater than humanity,
 to help...
 ...but it's something else again
 to believe in a God who is good and powerful,
 and to still live in a world of suffering and fear.
 How do we reconcile our faith in God
 with the facts of the world as it is?
 It's hard.
 To believe that God is good,
 that God has the power and the will
 to create, to save,
 to heal, to do anything...
 ...and yet.
 And yet, "destruction and violence confront us;
 conflict is present
 and we must endure strife."

We might very easily be tempted to say to God,
 "We quit. You're just going to have to go on without us.
 We can't believe that you are good and just anymore."
 But that is precisely what Habakkuk the prophet
 did *not* do.

He asks his “how long’s” and his “why’s,”
but he doesn’t give up.

And I actually think that it’s faith that made him ask,
that makes us ask,
that makes us sad and confused and frustrated
with the bad things that happen.
It is precisely because we do believe
that God is just and righteous
and holy
and good
that injustice and suffering
in the world so confuse us.

God responds to Habakkuk’s confused and frustrated questions
with an answer that is complex, subtle
and nearly as hard to take
as the awful situation
Habakkuk was already living through.
Habakkuk doesn’t hesitate to call God on the dangers of this plan,
one that involves the kingdom of Judah being invaded and exiled,
just like the kingdom of Israel.
And yet, Habakkuk resolves to listen, and to wait.

After hearing God’s plan,
at the beginning of chapter 2, Habakkuk wrote this:
“I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read 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 live by their faith.”
God says...wait, and don’t give up.
Keep faith, live by that faith,
for just a little longer.
The vision God promises to Habakkuk
is of the coming of justice,

and of making all things whole
 and right again in his world.
 And in 3:1, Habakkuk says, full of hope and conviction:
 "O Lord, I have heard of what you have done,
 and I am filled with awe.
 Now do again in our times the great deeds you used to do."

A wonderful picture of faith emerges here,
 as Habakkuk has this moment of crisis in his relationship with God,
 and then comes out the other side, transformed.
 The righteous
 – those who trust God, and follow God and love God –
 the righteous live now
 in the light of the promises received.
 God has promised a vision of a world
 where there is justice, fairness,
 generosity, compassion and companionship.
 We live now, worship now, act now,
 in full faith that it will come.
 Yes, when we look around now,
 we see a world in which all too often
 our faith in a good God may raise nearly as many questions
 as it answers.
 But we trust that God's vision is coming,
 and growing, even now.

This is a hopeful kind of faith;
 the kind of faith that lights a fire in us,
 sends us out the door,
 believing and certain of what we hope for,
 even when it's hard to see it coming.

But faith doesn't end there.

Habakkuk's faith is refined a little further,
 from fired-up hopeful energy
 to a deep peace and lasting joy.

At the very end of chapter 3, v.17-19,
 he celebrates this new realisation about his faith in God:
 "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 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.”

That picture of hopeful, fired-up, awe-filled faith
 drawn for us by Habakkuk
 has another side, it seems,
 showing us another way that we can live by faith:
 faith hopes,
 but faith also loves.

This second side of Habakkuk’s picture of faith
 shows us a faith for long, sleepless nights, full of worry;
 it shows us faith at the end of a bad day or a hard week,
 faith that keeps us going through months of fear
 or a grief-laden year.

This is a picture of faith
 when our “whys” and our “how longs”
 overwhelm us,
 as crisis after crisis hits.

And that faith looks like this:

We do not rejoice only when the barns are full,
 when the fields are teeming with livestock,
 and when the orchards blossom.

We rejoice in God, in God’s blessings,
 even when the barns, the pastures
 and the branches are empty.

Habakkuk discovered that he loved *God*,
 not just the blessings that God gave him and his people.

And this picture of total failure,
 of an uncertain future,
 of a hopeless moment,
 helps *us* discover that a faithful heart
 will yet rejoice in a God who is good,
 even when there’s not much good
 to be seen.

By the end of Habakkuk’s book,
 his homeland’s position in the regional hierarchy of kingdoms
 has not changed;

Judah is still a small, floundering nation,
populated and led
mostly by morally and spiritually bankrupt people.
The empire that will invade
and take the last of God's free people
into exile skirts the horizon,
just out of sight.
The situation is not improved.
And yet, Habakkuk is uplifted and encouraged;
his faith has been transformed.
Whatever happens, as bad as it will get,
as often as he questions and laments,
as empty as his barns and storehouses get,
his faith will remain,
rooted in love for God.
There is a wealth of trust expressed
in making that last step
from having faith in what God is doing and will do,
fed by those blessings and hope-filled visions of the future,
to having faith in God,
just because He's God
and we love him.
And yet, that's the unconditional, generous way God loves us, isn't it?
It's a hard step to take; but it's worth it.
The joyous upswell of peace and the buoyant freedom
of that last step of faith
will take us dancing along the heights,
sure-footed as a deer,
strong and safe
in our relationship with God,
forever.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.