

Habakkuk 3:17-19

"Faith in an Upside Down World"

How many of you have a comfort food? The thing that you crave when you feel bad, are tired or have just had a long day. I usually go for chocolate or ice cream but some people choose potato chips, chicken noodle soup or a glass of wine. How about a comfort place? It might be sitting on your porch reading a book, working in the garden, the beach, the mountains, YOUR pew in church or even at the grave of a loved one. If we are really blessed, some of us even have a comfort person – that special friend with whom we can be completely authentic, the big sister who will tell us the truth- even if it hurts, or the neighbor who is the FIRST one you want to share good news with.

And whether you realize it or not, most of us have a "Comfort Scripture". That is the passage that we turn to that will always give us exactly what we need when the world seems to have lost its way. Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want". Romans 8: "Nothing will separate us from the love of God." Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." For me, it is Habakkuk 3:17-19. Some years ago, I decided to declare it as my personal statement of faith.

I discovered the Minor Prophets during Seminary, having never really paid them much attention before. And I became completely fascinated. They all contain words of warning against pending judgment due to Israel's inability to live as covenant people. But they also bring words of hope that, even in our sinfulness, God will never leave us or forsake us. Like any good parent, even when we have to be punished, God still waits for us with open arms, praying for our return. One would think that God would just give up.

Habakkuk, whose name in Hebrew means "to embrace" most likely wrote these words as an intercessory prayer for a worshipping community. He is an example to us all of the faithful person who, having lived in the world as it is, has grown weary of all the sin and destruction that seems to have become accepted as the norm. And this could easily describe you and me on any given day.

Since we have watched both the horror of destruction and the outpouring of compassion that has been the story of Houston and the outlying area in the last week, I have found myself reaching for my comfort Scripture. Habakkuk's words are written to a people who are in between the promise of God's goodness and the revelation that this promise is true. These particular verses always offer me the hope that I need when the world seems to be upside down. And even though he wrote his words 600 years before the birth of Christ, they are always amazingly relevant.

While some prophets predict or speculate that an enemy is coming upon the Lord's people, Habakkuk has no doubt. It is only a matter of time before the Babylonians rush in and destroy Judah and her people. So when impending doom is coming his way, Habakkuk's faith waivers a little in the beginning of his dialogue with God. Then his faith watches to see how God will respond and finally his faith worships God for his goodness in all times and places. Even though, at that moment, there is no evidence that God WILL rescue them, Habakkuk has faith. His words of praise and worship are the verses that we just heard.

But in order to help all of YOU feel the faith that I do when I read these words, let me clarify the passage by telling you what this prophecy is NOT. Habakkuk's words are NOT about God's justice. Nor are they an effort to justify the ways of God to humankind for our sins.

Habakkuk knows that God's judgment is ALWAYS just and he know that God's grace and mercy are evident. However, this is not the main point of his small book.

Habakkuk is NOT about human doubt. He is a man of strong faith and prayer and is completely grounded in his call from God. But I dare say that even the most faithful among us has had doubt at some time in our lives. Habakkuk is NOT about addressing human suffering. He does confirm that we live in a sinful world and that we must learn to live with evil surrounding us at every turn. But again, this is not his main reason for preaching to God's people.

So what IS this prophecy all about? Habakkuk is a well written theology about the sovereignty of God. And friends, when the world is upside down, I find great comfort in knowing that I am not in charge. What hope we are given in times of both prosperity and adversity when we remember that our powerful God is with always with us, always working in our lives.

I read a story about a woman who was very discouraged because of the many problems in her life. As she was walking down the street, she met a friend from church who asked, "How are you doing today?" With a sour look and a bitter shrug she replied, "Oh, not too bad—under the circumstances." The other person quickly countered, "Well, get above the circumstances! That's where Jesus is." Her friend believed in the sovereignty of God which reminds us all that God has a history of making and keeping promises. And that is what Habakkuk clings to.

"Habakkuk is a book about a God who has promised to Abraham that he will make a new community of Abraham's descendants and that he will bring blessing on all the families of the earth through that community. It is a book about a God whose will for humankind is that we have life and have it more abundantly. It is a book about God's desire that human beings live

together in joy and security and righteousness, in a community ordered by his divine will and faithful to his divine lordship . . . Habakkuk is a book about the providence of God." (1)

This seems like a relatively simple thought, one that easy to believe. But maybe not! I was at a wedding reception once and when it was revealed to the table that I am a minister, one man began questioning me on my theology. Of course, he didn't *know* that's what he was doing but he was. He was obviously struggling with the ways things were going in his world and thought I could give him some answers. Hazards of the sport when you are a pastor just trying to eat your steak like everyone else.

Ultimately I told him that I believe God has a plan, a place and a purpose for every one of his children. He jumped right on that and said, "So you don't believe in free will?" "I absolutely do!" was my reply. Then I followed with, "I believe that we have 100% free will and we have 100% no control over anything." I will let you ponder THAT over your OWN steak.

But many people will try to use the concept of free will to argue against the providence of God. When they do this, they are trying to make God into some kind of puppeteer who just pulls strings all day long. And nothing could be farther from the truth. However, I can't help but wonder if I lived in Houston or Port Arthur or Beaumont, Texas if I would argue the same thing. Truth be told, I might – until I reached for my comfort Scripture of Habakkuk!

Because when nothing seemed right in the world, Habakkuk turns to the only thing that makes sense to him. GOD! And friends, it is hard to make sense of residents in nursing homes who have been sitting in water up to their waists, waiting on someone to rescue them. It is hard to make sense of a policeman who drowns in his car while trying to help other people. It is hard to make sense of babies in a NICU who have to be flown to other states for care, away from their

parents, because the hospital is flooded AND has no clean water. But the God who makes and keeps promises, Habakkuk's God and yours and mine is in the midst of all of this tragedy.

I know this because I saw the picture of a woman being carried by the man who rescued her by boat from her flooded home, while her 13 month-old son slept safe and secure in her arms, unaware of the tragedy unfolding around him. I know this because I saw the story of a furniture store who opened its doors for policemen and other first responders to take naps or the unused, unsold mattresses in their store in order to get rest before their next tour of duty. I know this because I saw people rescuing dogs and returning them to their owners, well-aware of how they would feel if their own pet was left behind. In the midst of horrific loss and sadness, God's people come together to be their best, over and over and give us all hope.

And while the flood waters of Harvey have been physically far from us here in South Carolina, I found myself feeling fear over what will happen when the waters subside. Yet, my comfort Scripture, Habakkuk, helped me deal with my fears, too. These words are a reminder that our God, who has proven Himself faithful throughout the years, is always with us. And this is the sovereign God that Habakkuk reminds us of.

He knew that tragedy was coming and it struck fear in his heart. I am sure that, as he waited for the day when Babylon would invade the kingdom of Judah, his heart pounded, his lips quivered, and his legs trembled. Yet one thing we learn from Habakkuk is that, while fear is a legitimate emotion in the face of tragedy, it doesn't have to immobilize us. Because when we don't understand the trials we are going through, we can recount how God has worked in history. That's what Habakkuk did. It didn't dispel his fear, but it gave him the courage to move on by choosing to praise the Lord. And that is what we can do as well.

I was blessed this weekend to be at Lake Hartwell with my family but it means that I had to drive in this morning. On the way, I was listening to a Christian radio station and heard a song by Casting Crowns in which they sang, "On my soul, you are not alone. There's a place in you where fear has to face the God you know." And I thought, I worked about six hours on this sermon that they pretty much summed the whole thing up in two lines!

Because in the end, Habakkuk refused to let circumstances dampen his faith or crush his hope. He closes his words by saying that, even as fearful as life is for the Israelites, he can rest assured that God is still in control. Habakkuk promised that his praise and thanksgiving would be to God at all times regardless of his present situation in life. He teaches us that true thankfulness is not dependent on or conditioned by external things. It is established and rooted in God's loving providence.

Some translations for this passage actually say, "The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places." A hind is a female deer that can place her back feet exactly where her front feet stepped. Not one inch off! She is able to run with abandonment! In times of danger, she is able to run securely and not get "off track." The hind is able to scale unusually difficult terrain and elude predators. Habakkuk's faith reminds us that God will enable us to rise to great heights when we trust in Him completely.

So as God's people today, who also live in between the promises of our Sovereign God and the fulfillment of those promises, eat our chocolate or dig in the garden or sit in the presence of a trusted friend, may we also remember to ask God to give us hind's feet. It is my prayer for each of us that God will strengthen us and encourage us to rely on the goodness of God's providence when we deal with the sadness and tragedy that often

confronts us in an upside down world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1) Intepretation, Nahum – Malachi, Elizabeth Achtemeier, John Knox Press, Nashville, 1986, pp.31, 32.