

“An Evening with the Minor Prophets”

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

September 8, 2019- PM Sermon

Rev. Peter Jonker

Habakkuk, Haggai, and Zephaniah

If you were to pick one other Biblical character who is most like Habakkuk, who would that be? That’s a pretty hard question and most of you have no idea. So let me read and see if you have a guess...Read Habakkuk 1...You may be surprised to know that the Biblical character who most reminds me of Habakkuk is Job. Habakkuk is like Job. Most prophets of God speak God’s word to us. Most prophets say, “Thus saith the Lord O people!!” and then they proceed to bring God’s will to us. Habakkuk is different. He reverses the flow. Habakkuk spends much of his book bringing our words to God. Habakkuk speaks to God on behalf of people and the word he brings is a word of lament.

Why lament? Habakkuk lived in Judah around 610 BC. For those who know your ancient near eastern history, that’s about 20 years before the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem. It is also a time of moral confusion, injustice and idolatry: the weak are oppressed, righteousness is nowhere to be found. It’s a messy time. Habakkuk, is trying to be a righteous man in the middle of this mess. He cries out to God: *Lord where’s the justice? Where’s the rescue? How about a little help over here?* That’s the first 4 verses of our reading. God responds in verses 5-11. “I have heard your cries and I have a plan for justice: I’m going to send the Babylonian’s to smash your country to pieces. “Habakkuk is stunned. His lament gets ratcheted up a decibel or two, “*Babylon!?! You can’t be serious!! You’re going to send that pagan, idol worshiping nation to destroy and conquer the people of promise? That’s your plan for justice and righteousness?! How is that going to help?!*” That complaint reaches a crescendo in verse 14: “Lord you have made us like the fish of the sea.” Whoever wants to can hook us and cook us. There’s no justice and righteousness, there’s no order – we just scurry around down here like bugs until someone steps on us. Habakkuk speaks to God on behalf of everyone who believes that God is the Lord of history, who believes that God has a plan, but who has also been smacked around by life. And they just can’t understand how this miserable junk can possibly be part of any good plan. It’s very Job like.

And just as with Job, God has a response for the angry prophet. At the beginning of chapter two God says ‘Ok Habakkuk, sit down, pick up a pen and write this down, write it down in big letters so everyone can read it. (That’s what he literally says in 2:2) Here’s how it is: *I am justice*. I am against the wicked in this world. I am against people who exploit others. I am against those who use violence to gain wealth. I am against those who worship idols and, make no mistake, I will bring reckoning on all the unjust. *I am also power*. Chapter 3 contains a magnificent description of God’s power: His splendor is like the sunrise; rays flash from his hand. He stands and shakes the earth until the ancient mountains crumble. The seas part before him.

So, just like Job, Habakkuk gets an answer, and just like Job *the answer God gives isn’t very specific*. Habakkuk doesn’t hear how God will use Babylon to work his purposes out, Habakkuk doesn’t hear why God would choose to act this way, Habakkuk doesn’t hear that he personally will be OK. In chapters 2 and 3 he simply gets this overwhelming vision of God’s love and God’s power. And just like Job, Habakkuk rests

in this vision. He is still afraid of the future destruction, he still doesn't understand why God does things the way He does, but he rests in God. He says—*“Though the fig tree will not bud, and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food... yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my savior.”*

Our situation is not unlike Habakkuk's. We have lots of times where we look at circumstances and we have no idea why this is happening and how this could POSSIBLY fit into the plans of a good God. And just like Habakkuk, we don't get an explanation from God, but we do get a response. God tells us: I am justice. I am power. But then he shows us one more thing. He shows us his one and only Son, sharing our pain and confusion, dying for our sins, dying to make things right, and then rising from the grave in power. It's not an explanation. It doesn't tell us why we have to deal with our thing. But in that amazing moment we see all of God's power, all of God's justice, and we realize that all the power and the justice are rooted in His steadfast love, and we realize that all of that steadfast love is set on us. It's not an explanation. But it's enough for us to say...*“Though the fig tree will not bud, and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food.... yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my savior.”*

Zephaniah 1:10-18: In the traditional requiem mass, sung at Catholic funerals there is a portion of the liturgy called the *Dies Irae*, literally the Day of Wrath. It is a portion of the mass where the worshippers remember the terrible judgment God preserves for all wickedness on judgment day. Here's a portion of it translated from the Latin: *“The day of wrath, that day which will reduce the world to ashes, as foretold by David. What terror there will be when the Lord comes to judge all rigorously. When the judge will be seated, all that is hidden will appear, and nothing will go unpunished.”* It's a pretty pointed piece of liturgy.

Things have really changed. Can you imagine us trying to do anything like the *Dies Irae* in our funerals today? We always sing hymns in our funerals, but they're usually songs that express hope of the resurrection. Ruth and I will always read bible passages in our funerals, but they will always be passages that express grace and mercy. No one wants to hear about the day of wrath which will reduce the world to ashes at the funeral of their loved one. Which may explain why most Christians don't spend much time in Zephaniah. Zephaniah is a *Dies Irae* kind of book. 90% of it is a graphic description of the great and terrible Day of the Lord and the devastating judgment that God will bring upon evil on that day. The nine verses that we read are pretty representative of what you find throughout: Blood poured out like dust; ruin, devastation, darkness and gloom; the passion of God's anger unleashed. Zephaniah rubs all our modern religious sensibilities the wrong way.... which is maybe a sign that we ought to pay attention, we ought to listen. Because there are things these hard words can teach us.

First, books like Zephaniah remind us that God hates sin. He is not soft on it; he doesn't let it slide. Every sin tears a hole in the fabric of His creation and that makes him *mad*. He will not tolerate it. In our passage it is particularly the sin of greed that makes God boil. Maybe you noticed how God promises that the judgment will start from the sheep gate to the second quarter of the city? Here's why that matters: That's the commercial area of Jerusalem where the merchants hang out. It's the ancient equivalent of Zephaniah saying: A great cry will be heard from Wall Street. And then in verse 13 we heard how the great homes and the wealth shall be laid bare by the judgment, and we hear

how silver and gold will not be able to save. This whole passage is a judgment against those who are a little too optimistic about the power of money.

That's not a comfortable word for us is it? I have a 401K, how about you? Anything that might suggest that God is angry with complacent, wealthy people is going to set us on edge. But that's the point! We need to be set on edge once in a while. We need to be reminded that God is not a complacent, indifferent God, so that we will not become complacent and indifferent people.

Second, we need passages like this one because they remind us that there will be a final judgment of God. *And because there will be a final judgment of God, we don't have to worry about making final judgments ourselves.* We can leave final judgment, the final sorting out to God. This is a great comfort, because most of the time it is impossible for us to really do justice.

Here's what I mean: Two children have a fight and come running to us, both of them pointing their finger at one another in accusation, "He took my toy! Yeah well I had it first!!" It's a basic kid fight. And yet, even for a basic kid fight, because we don't really know what happened here it is impossible for us to resolve this case with perfect justice. We do our best. We urge forgiveness. We suggest sharing and sacrifice, but we cannot know if our justice has hit the mark.

If that is true in the case of children fighting over a toy, how much more isn't it true in the case of larger disputes? How can we possibly do perfect justice in our friend's messy divorce? How can we possibly do justice in an ancient international dispute like the conflict in the middle east? How can we patch up the mess of racial injustice in this country with all its residual effects? We cannot do it. We must try, as best we can of course. With humility and forgiveness and hope, we must try to do at least partial justice, but our best human efforts will always be partial at best. In fact, I would argue, and this is me speaking not the Lord, if we fallen human beings ever claim to see perfect justice and then try to bring that justice, *we will do more harm than good.*

As Christians who believe in the final judgment of God, we don't have to figure it all out perfectly. We do our best and leave the last judgment up to God, and we can have the comfort of knowing that the judge of all the earth will do it exactly right. He will make the crooked straight. He will make the rough places plain. He will work justice with mercy and grace in just the right portion so that we will stand back and say: "*Sing praise to the Lord, Righteous and just is the King of the nations! Judging the people with equity!*"

Haggai 2:1-9: Most prophets sing of justice. Most prophets raise their voice in the street against greed and oppression and neglect of the poor. Not Haggai. Haggai raises his voice for a building project. Haggai is the prophet of bricks and mortar. Haggai's ministry takes place right after the Babylonian captivity is over. Judah has been in Babylon for 70 years, but now they come home and they begin to rebuild their life. Houses have been built and fields have been planted; something like normal life has started to take shape. But while the people of Jerusalem are working long and hard to restore agriculture, and while they are all deeply interested in making sure their homes are snug and cozy and paneled, no one has done anything about the temple! So Haggai raises his voice in the streets and he says. "*Why should you all live in paneled houses while the Lord's house lies in ruins!*" He lights a fire under the people and soon the temple is under construction. (1:5-11)

Which leads to the interesting scene in our passage. The temple building is just beginning and the new temple is starting to take shape. It has been 70 years since the first temple was destroyed, but in the city there are a few octogenarians who saw Solomon's temple. They actually remember the glory of the old building. And though the younger ones have never seen the original, they've all heard stories about it, about how great cedars were brought from Lebanon, about how the fabrics were expensive and finely woven, about how the whole thing was overlaid with gold—every person in that community had picture of that beautiful building burning in their mind's eye. But as this temple took shape it was clear it would be nothing like the old one. There were no cedars of Lebanon for the beams, just whatever scruffy old wood they could find in the hills around the city, and there wasn't gold leaf everywhere because the poor exiles didn't have much gold and the weaving was only ordinary because there wasn't the capacity for fine textiles. In every respect this new temple was a poor reflection of reflection of the original. So the people are downcast. The people feel like: this temple is pathetic! "Here we are this little rag tag group of exiles gathered around a two-bit temple. This shabby little building is just a reminder of how pathetic we are!"

But Haggai says, *"Who among you saw that house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it seem to you like nothing? Take courage all you people!! I am with you says the Lord! My spirit abides among you! I will live in this place; I will put my glory in this ramshackle house. All the world will be shaken by the things that begin in this place!! The splendor of this house will be greater than that of the former."*

The promises of the covenant must have looked pretty weak to the crew gathered there. This talk of glory in the temple and nations shaking must have seemed far-fetched.

But 500 years later, a young mother and her husband took their 8-day old baby into the temple to be circumcised. No one noticed the child—no one except a couple of older folk in the temple courts, but they recognized that this child was the Messiah. On that day the glory of the Lord shone brighter in the temple than ever before, because the desire of nations, Jesus Christ, the Lord himself had come to his temple! On that day God started something that shook the entire world.

Jesus changed the temple completely. Through his death and resurrection, the curtain of the temple was torn in two and the place of his glory changed. Jesus is the new temple of the Lord. The glory of God rests on him. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the place of God's glory shifted again. Now the temple of the Lord is his body, the church. The shekinah Spirit descended on us. 'We are being built like living stones into a place where his glory dwells' says Peter. *We are the temple in which his glory dwells.* Sometimes that seems incredible too. Jesus was glorious sure. He did miracles and walked on water. His life was obviously a glorious temple. But the church! Look at us! We fight about everything. It takes forever for us to get things done. We look around at each other and if Haggai were to ask us his question – does this temple seem to you like nothing? – we would probably say yes. If we are the body of Christ, we are a poor reflection of the original. But Haggai says to us, Jesus says to us, "Take courage O people! Take courage O pastors; take courage O committee members; take courage O volunteers; for I am with you, according to my promise. My Spirit abides with you do not fear! Through you, I will accomplish all my purposes!"

© Rev. Peter Jonker

