

Sermon Series: Set Free

Sermon Title: Joy

Habakkuk 3:17-19

**by David Hockett
September 24, 2017**

Habakkuk begins with a lament, with an outpouring of emotion to God for the hurt and suffering of his people...

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

Why does it seem sometimes that the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer so much? Why does it seem, at times, that God is absent or at least silent? We all know personally or have heard of situations where a family seems to be bearing more than their fair share of life's burdens. We have friends and loved ones diagnosed with horrible disease. We see families torn apart by infidelity and addiction.

There is so much suffering in the Caribbean, and Mexico, in India and Bangladesh, and certainly parts of our nation where lives have been turned upside down because of natural disaster. We see the horrors of war and terrorism, whole nations in turmoil, with no apparent end in sight. It's hard to know what to say, much less what to believe; what certainty we can cling to for strength and hope when it seems like we "cry for help and God will not listen."

And there are no easy answers. This dilemma is as old as the book of Job and older. We've all heard the really bad attempts to make sense of suffering and injustice – "everything happens for a reason" or "it's all part of God's plan." Habakkuk offers no pious platitudes, no theological shortcuts, and no greeting card sentimentality. Habakkuk names the harsh reality; he gives a vocabulary to the people's experience.

*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,... - Habakkuk 3:17*

Habakkuk was likely writing to God's people around 605 or 604 BCE during the corrupt reign of King Jehoiakim, King of Judah. This was the period just prior to the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 597 during which Judah was overrun with Jerusalem finally falling in 587. Habakkuk could see the destruction and devastation on the horizon. So, he struggles with maintaining a belief in God's just rule in spite of an unjust world. And he names that struggle here. He doesn't hide from the harsh reality of suffering and injustice, he calls it what it is. One commentator points out that "These six phrases of beautiful poetry have an edge. In roughly ascending order, Habakkuk describes the severity of what will soon happen to Israel. Figs were a delicacy. If the fig trees did not blossom, you would miss them, but this would not be real privation. Grapes were used primarily for wine, so once again, you could survive without grapes. It wouldn't be the end of the world. Olives were used mostly for olive oil, and olive oil was used constantly for cooking and for light. And so with this phrase, Habakkuk is describing a real inconvenience, even privation. But then notice what happens: the fields no longer produce the two staples - barley and wheat. Now we have genuine suffering, even starvation. Sheep were used for wool and occasionally for food. They were foundational in the economy. If your own crops failed, then your herds of sheep would enable you to trade with other nations. But they wouldn't be able to do this after the Babylonians came. Cattle were not often eaten. They were used for heavy farm work. Habakkuk is saying, "After the Babylonians get done, we will not be able to recover. We won't have the means to start over.

He's describing a sort of scorched earth policy, as when Sherman marched from Atlanta to the sea in the Civil War. Or it's like the Russians retreating before the Germans in WWII, burning their own land to prevent the Germans from living off of Mother Russia. Habakkuk trembles when he thinks of his future under the Babylonians. His guts tremble. His legs give out. It brings him to his knees. I know that some of you have been that low, or someone you know has. You or they have lived in scorched earth. You might even be there now."¹

And yet, amazingly Habakkuk doesn't stop there. He goes on, in the midst of terrible suffering and the likely destruction of his homeland to speak of hope and joy.

¹ Jeffrey Arthurs, What to Do When Your Fig Tree Doesn't Blossom.

*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. – Habakkuk 3:18-19*

“Yet I will rejoice,” Habakkuk sings. How? How is it possible for Habakkuk, and for us, to find joy, a sense of hope, and peace, and the assurance of God’s goodness in a setting like this? Habakkuk is filled with joy, not superficial happiness, but deep and abiding joy because Habakkuk remembers. He remembers who God has been and trusts in who God is and who God will be.

*O LORD, I have heard of your renown,
and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.
In our own time revive it;
in our own time make it known;
in wrath may you remember mercy.
³God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
⁴The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden....
¹³You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed.*

Habakkuk remembers the goodness and the faithfulness of God, recalling the Exodus and how God saved the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Habakkuk remembers who God is and trusts, that even when he can’t see how or when, God will act, God will be faithful; God will keep God’s promises, and will redeem and restore God’s people. And the knowledge of God’s goodness and faithfulness, even in the face of certain destruction, fills Habakkuk with joy.

Now this is no easy thing to do. And it’s not something that happens apart from our abiding daily in the presence of Christ through prayer, and attention to God’s word, and in fellowship with others who are also abiding in Christ.

I am fully aware that some among us and some who are close to us are in a place that feels like scorched earth, a place that is hard, and difficult, a place that seems devoid of hope, or joy, or even the presence of God. You know what it means to say with Habakkuk, “O LORD, how long

shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” And I would never make light of your suffering or the suffering of others or suggest that the answer is to just somehow find within yourself the strength to be joyful. Habakkuk doesn’t gloss over the suffering and injustice he sees. He names it, he calls it what it is. And I think he would invite us to do the same. And yet he would also encourage us to remember.

Rob Bell tells the story about a rabbi from Krakow who has a dream that in a far away city there is a bridge and beneath the bridge is hidden a great treasure. And so the rabbi travels the long and arduous journey to the far away city and comes to the bridge.

On the bridge there is a policeman and the rabbi hides in the brush beside the road trying to figure out how he can get at the treasure undetected. Well, the policeman spots him. Comes over to the edge of the road and says, “You there, what are you doing hiding in those bushes?” The rabbi reluctantly comes out and begins to tell his story. “You see I had this dream that in a far away city there was a great treasure buried beneath a bridge.” The policeman starts to laugh and says, “Are you crazy? If I believed silly dreams like that I’d believe that somewhere in Krakow there is a rabbi who has a treasure underneath his bed.” And with that the rabbi smiles, thanks the policeman, and hurries on his way back home.

I think Habakkuk would say that when it’s hard to be joyful, when you find yourself in that place wondering “O Lord, how long...?” you don’t have to run off looking for something you think you lack. You don’t have to chase after treasure under bridges. Going far distances to pursue whatever it is you think will enable joy to return. Because the only thing that can bring true joy, and peace, and contentment, the one thing, or better, the one person who can fill our hearts with joy is already with us – Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. The gospel, you see, is not only true when things are going well. It’s good news all the time and especially when life is hard and we struggle to believe it. The deepest truth about us, is the truth that we are already blessed, we already have the treasure we seek, we are already here and now the beloved children of God, because Jesus, God’s own Son, has come and walked among us. He’s stood in the midst of our suffering. And he longs to lift up the lowly, to fill us when we are hungry, and to set us free from all of our posturing and pretension in order that we might simply receive him and welcome him and know the joy of his grace and love that have been with us all along.

Joy is a gift, the fruit of the Spirit’s work within us. Joy is the ability to affirm the goodness and faithfulness of God when all the evidence says something to the contrary.

And all of our brief, momentary experiences of joy – the joy that comes through friendship, or the gift of children or grandchildren, or the joy of a beautiful hike or sunset, or the joy of laughter, or the joy of a deep relationship, the joy of a meal with dear friends, all of those moments of joy are a gift. And, as C.S. Lewis suggests, they are like signposts on our life’s

journey pointing us ever onwards towards the greatest joy we will ever experience – life with Christ.²

Followers of Jesus are a joyful people. Not naive and seeing the world through rose colored glasses, not glossing over the suffering and brokenness and injustice we see around us. I do not believe that the world is basically as God intended it to be and it just needs a little fixing up here and there. Joy is not based upon our potential to fix things and make them better. We are joyful even when the evidence says we shouldn't be because of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is yet to do. It's in remembering the goodness of the Lord, remembering the power of the resurrection, remembering that love wins, that we have hope and joy.

Margaret Sangster Phippen wrote that in the mid 1950's that her father, British minister W. E. Sangster, began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg. When he went to the doctor, he found that he had an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular weakness. His muscles would gradually waste away, his voice would fail, his throat would soon become unable to swallow. Sangster threw himself into his work in British home missions, figuring he could still write and he would have even more time for prayer. "Let me stay in the struggle Lord," he pleaded. "I don't mind if I can no longer be a general, but give me just a regiment to lead." He wrote articles and books, and helped organize prayer groups throughout England. "I'm only in the kindergarten of suffering," he told people who pitied him. Gradually Sangster's legs became useless. His voice went completely. But he could still hold a pen, shakily.

On Easter morning, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to his daughter. In it, he said, "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen!'--but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout."

That's joy. Having no voice, and yet still wanting to shout, because you know who God has been, who God is, and who God will always be. Amen.

² C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.