

Sermon Text for March 9, 2025

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Habakkuk 3:17-19 and Matthew 19:16-30

The First will be Last and the Last Will be First

The Problem: How is it possible to be faithful to God- in war famine and in plenty?

The Good news: It is possible to be faithful, with God.

So what?

Good morning! It's March 9:

Daylight Saving arrived.

Lent begins.

Spring seems to be knocking on our door and I've been with you for 6 months now.

Some of you have been asking when I'm finished and what I will do next.

If I've had a blank look on my face, it is because I am in denial.

It has been such a joy to serve with you.

Please do pray for me and my discernment process.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

There is currently a famine in Sudan.

More than 11 million people are displaced- nearly all face food scarcity.

10s of thousands have died.

Scripture which addresses famine.

If you thought Habakkuk employed a bit of poetic license, exaggerating the severity of his situation, I would not blame you.

However, it seems he was not.

An autocratic and vicious ruler from the east laid siege on the city of Jerusalem 600 years before Jesus.

They destroyed Solomon's Temple

and flooded their fields, devastating their entire food supply.

their olives, their grapes

their figs

their grain;
their ewes and lambs
their goats,
their cattle.

The Babylonian's war strategy was three pronged:

- take the most capable people back to Babylon (the Exile)
- and leave the most poor and vulnerable- in the language of Matthew, "the least"- to fend for themselves in the most difficult situation.
- ruin the land so the people who are left, starve

Something like, avian bird flu hitting every farm in Lancaster County and mysteriously spread to cattle while there was also severe drought and the roads and rail destroyed, so all trade ceased.

I imagine, Habakkuk was one of those left behind to waste away in the fields surrounding Jerusalem.

But, he did not waste away.

His prayers and his hope in God are recorded in this book

And remain a testimony to both the great evil done and the promises of God.

Hab. Supplied a statement which forms the bedrock of Paul's theology.

Hab 2:4 is found Hebrews, Galatians and it is the purpose statement of Romans.

Romans 1:17 reads, "the justice of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written the one who is just will live by faith"

Habakkuk's understanding of justice is only possible, because it is God's justice and it is exercised through His faithfulness to his people.

Our reading today are the final words of Habakkuk's testimony.

They are a personal lament made on behalf of a broken people.

We don't talk much about lament- it might seem, we don't need to.

But, the Bible is full of prayers of lament:

They are scattered through the Psalms, and there is a whole book, called Lamentations.

Prayers of lament name the reality of pain.

Call on God,

And return to praise and rejoicing in the Lord.

They teach us how to deal with hardship and awful things beyond our control.

They teach us faith and righteousness, when we don't feel like it.

Hab. 3:17-19 is a stunning poem of grief.

[Read 18-19 again]

Let's look at the very last words with me, 3:19

“With a stringed instrument”

These are instructions for corporate worship, also found in some Psalms.

In the face of their very difficult stresses,

the people left in the destroyed fields surrounding Jerusalem overcome the temptation to devolve into a fractured community.

Despite the evidence at hand, they gather together

As a people, though weak and vulnerable,

they come together to name their pain, call on God, and rejoice in his promise.

Story?

Second, Habakkuk (and his people) turn to rejoice in God, the LORD, who is their strength, according to verse 19.

The complaining and grief in this poem are contained by the joy of knowing:

The Lord makes them able to sing and dance.

It does not erase the grief

It contains it.

Despite how things look, God has them.

God is holding them.

We might imagine that the words, “I will exult in the God of my salvation” are like a gentle pair of hands,

Holding a very tender group of people who have been through a LOT.

Application hint: Consider praying the Psalms this Lent. 3/day would get you through most of them. One in the morning, one in the evening. A mini Pray-Scripture- Action

That said, The Book of Habakkuk ends in a kind of cliffhanger:

We leave Habakkuk, faithfully waiting on God for the Day when He will enact his vision of salvation.

Turn with me to Matthew 19:16-30.

Hear the Word of the Lord.

In the story, we meet a man who is in his twenties and apparently owns some things he does not want to part with.

In him, we encounter a different kind of deprivation

The young man approaches Jesus looking for “eternal life”.

Jesus points him to the orthodox answer: keep the commandments.

The man can and does affirm all he has done in that vein.

This is the kind of young man, schools and communities are proud to call their own.

But- and, this is for the educators and social workers- Jesus employs the best version of a strengths-based approach.

Let’s look at verses 18-20 again.

He draws out and builds on the 4 commands this young man has kept.

Jesus says nothing about the other 6 commands. Interesting.

It’s the man *himself* who feels he is lacking something.

He initiates with Jesus three times in his quest for more- what do I do? Which commands? What do I still lack?

Still, Jesus does not mention the other 6 commands.

[Any ideas which are missing?]

This man wants more, and, has no idea how to satisfy his desire.

Just like the poetry of Habakkuk offers a **container** for the despair of his people, Jesus puts a boundary on this man’s seemingly insatiable (if communally acceptable) desire.

Lets look at verse 21 again.

“Sell your possessions.” The only thing you need more of is less.

That is, hunger for more gets in the way of getting what is needed.

So, Jesus says, “Sell what’s yours and, “Come, follow me.”

Jesus’ simple, single command embodies, fulfills, summarizes and echoes the 6 commands missing from the man’s life.

*I am the Lord your God,
have no other gods before me,
keep the sabbath*

and do not covet.

Only obedience to Jesus’ command, *Come, follow me* will satisfy this man’s hunger.

Jesus’ claim on his life is the very thing that will give him the life he desperately wants.

How are we to understand this difficult claim Jesus makes on the wealthy man?

He says, in Verse 19:14, It will be hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is easier than something impossible: a camel going through the eye of a needle. Jesus goes on to confirm, in verse 26, “it is impossible for people.”

Imagine with me for a minute this is a movie scene.

The needle is huge.

We can see the eye of the needle clearly.

On one side, Jesus stands, saying Come follow me.

On the other side, the man- and many people- stand in line to come through the eye of the needle. They are loaded down with their important things. Some carry valuables, others carry books of knowledge, others their beliefs. Things you’d take from your home in a fire.

As each one approaches, it’s clear they will not fit through with their things.

They are not sure their bodies will fit!

Jesus reaches his hand through the eye of the needle- so far, his body starts to slip through too.

And, it’s the movies so... we can see it happening.

The people who grab Jesus’ hand, and trust him, somehow come through the needle.

But none of their stuff comes.

They are stripped of all their things.

Whether it happens to us, as it did for Habakkuk, or “by choice”, entering life and the Kingdom of Heaven happens on Jesus’ terms and by his arm.

As Jesus says, ““For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”

The good news is, there is no loss, no deprivation, no threat, no poverty that has the power keep us out of life with Jesus.

In verse 30, our story ends with the catchy saying, *The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*

We’ll see a version of this saying again before we’re through Matthew.

Here, it seems Jesus is using the occasion of this man’s interest

To reinforce for his followers that he will faithfully- and more than adequately-

provide for those who let go of houses, even family, ways of doing things,
beliefs about what makes our life good-

He will provide life, beginning today and going on eternally.

In the Kingdom of heaven.

And, there will be 100x all we could want or ask for: .

I. Application

Pray the Psalms this Lent.

And, when you do, bring Jesus and his command, Come, follow me, along to
your prayer.