

Hespeler, 6 October, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4, Psalm 37:1-9, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

The Bible is an ancient book that is mostly concerned with ancient world problems and that is why I was kind of surprised the other day when I was reading in the Book of Habakkuk and I saw these words: **“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.”** I said, “Wow, Habakkuk, way to take the words right out of my mouth,” because it seems like every time I read or hear the news these days, I catch myself saying, **“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.”**

I look at the latest news from the federal election campaign and I want to cry out to the news editors, **“Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?”** I watch the latest Brexit news out of Great Britain and I lament that **“destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.”** And then I catch the news coming out of the United States – I hear about the latest investigation of the presidential administration and how they are saying that, this time, it’s going to be different, this time they’ve finally gone too far and we’re going to get them. And I say, **“strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.”**

I mean, I almost went to check the date on the Book of Habakkuk to make sure that it wasn’t written in 2019! But I am assured that it was written something like 2600 years ago and the destruction, violence, strife and contention that the prophet was concerned with had to do with the conquests of the ancient Babylonians and not the actions of modern presidents, prime ministers and politicians. But man, isn’t it amazing how little has really changed in about 2,600 years?

There is one difference, though, Habakkuk isn’t complaining to the media about what they are reporting like I might; he’s complaining to God. His powerful complaint is to the God who is allowing all of these things to take place. He is actually entering into a very difficult conversation with the God who has called him and made him a prophet.

And at first it seems as if God is not answering. Habakkuk is simply left wallowing in his despair at the state of things. But here is where Habakkuk really impresses me. He doesn’t give up. Instead he says, **“I will stand at my watchpost, 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.” Habakkuk will not allow God to get away without answering these difficult questions. Oh, couldn't we use a few people like Habakkuk these days – people who are willing to stand firm and demand the answers that are needed for this troubled time?

Isn't that what Greta Thunberg was doing at the United Nations a couple of weeks ago? She got up there and eloquently stated her personal lament regarding the issue that stands closest to her heart. She demanded answers; she demanded action. Perhaps she is a Habakkuk, a watcher standing on the ramparts, for our time. She certainly has a way of shaking people up and getting them angry at her just like the ancient prophets of Israel did.

Habakkuk's struggle with God does lead him to a kind of an answer: **“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.”** This is a powerful answer for our time as well! Don't give up on your vision. Don't give up on your dream of what the world should be. Yes, it may tarry. It may take an awfully long time – far too long for those who struggle, who weep and who are weary. But it is coming. I think that those are words we need to hear today too.

Habakkuk finishes this conversation with God by saying, **“but the righteous live by their faith.”** And these are the words upon which everything hangs because, with these words, Habakkuk is declaring that he's not just talking about holding on to an optimistic 'let's hope for the best' point of view. He's talking about something much more powerful; he's talking about faith.

Shortly after Greta Thunberg made her speech at the United Nations, there was a Christian pastor who went viral when, in some interview, he gave his reasons for not worrying about things like global warming. His answer, you see, was that after the flood in Genesis, God put up a rainbow and made a promise that the earth would never be flooded again. Therefore, the pastor reasoned, there could be no such thing as a global climate catastrophe because the Bible said so. I know that there are some people who would call what that man said a great example of faith, but I disagree. That is not faith, it is thoughtless optimism. It doesn't take any courage and it doesn't take any stand. At times like this, Habakkuk is teaching us, living by faith is what's going to get us there and that takes courage – that takes stepping out and imagining the world as it is supposed to be.

In our reading this morning from the Gospel, Jesus is struggling with the same problem as Habakkuk. Jesus is, once again, preaching to the huge crowds of people who seem to gather wherever he goes. People came out to listen to Jesus, not because everything was going well in Galilee, but rather because things were going very badly indeed, and he offered them a better way to see the world.

For example, many of the people in the crowd would have been slaves. There was a huge population of slaves in Galilee during the time of Jesus. In most places in the Roman Empire at that time, about twenty percent of the

population were slaves. They did not have their freedom and had no hope of finding it. Many of these slaves made their way to whatever towns or villages Jesus passed through and they were eager to hear anything that he might have to say. But they, perhaps more than anybody else, understood just how unfair the world that they lived in was.

One day, when Jesus was speaking to these crowds that included many slaves, he said this: **“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’?”** Can you imagine how those words sounded to the slaves who were in the crowd? They would have understood very well that those were words that would never be spoken to them. They understood that there was no place at the table for them.

That was one of the things that was fundamentally wrong with the society in which Jesus lived. The problem was not that there were some people who had to work really hard. That has always been true and will likely always be true. The problem was that they were some people who never had a place at the table. They did not belong and were not even recognized as human beings. And Jesus called it out right in front of everybody and even observed that everyone took it for granted that that was how it was supposed to be.

Now, if that was all that Jesus had done, if he had simply pointed out the way things worked and moved on, that would have been a rather mean thing to do. But, of course, that’s not what Jesus did. Jesus, like Habakkuk, recognized what was wrong with the world, called it out, and then decided that the righteous should live by their faith. In other words, Jesus, in faith, would live out the world as it was supposed to be instead of how it actually was.

How did Jesus do that? Well, one of the key ways that he did it was by practicing an open table. In a world that treated people very differently according to their social standing, status and gender and very carefully excluded from the dinner table all those who didn’t belong according to those standards – didn’t include slaves, didn’t include women and didn’t include people of lower social standing – Jesus made a point of breaking all of those social rules. When Jesus ate, there was a place for anybody. This seems to have been a hallmark and centerpiece of the ministry and work of Jesus, the way that he would share his table. He was constantly getting in trouble for it. People called him **“a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”** (Luke 7:34) precisely because of who he was willing to share his table with.

But the kicker is that Jesus didn’t just do this because he enjoyed the company of all sorts of people. I mean, he obviously *did* enjoy their company, he was not just putting on a show, but there was more to it. He did it because he genuinely believed that the most perfect picture of the world as it was supposed to be (this thing that he liked to call the kingdom of God) was picture of people of every status, every kind, sinners and outcasts included, gathered around one table enjoying one another’s company. It was a table with a place for

everybody. That picture of the world as it was supposed to be was impossible in the world that Jesus lived in. So what did he do? He went ahead and lived it out anyways, no matter how much people complained and criticized. That is the kind of thing that Habakkuk was talking about when he said that the righteous live by their faith.

So powerful was Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God that was made real around an open and welcoming table, that when the people who had loved him and followed him wanted to remember him, they naturally did it by gathering together and sharing in the same kind of meal where the table was open and everyone, no matter who she or he was, had a place. They shouldn't have been surprised when they discovered, in those shared meals, that he actually hadn't left them; he was there with them. And that is why today we will gather around this table. And it is not just here. In every church and all around the world today, Christians are gathering around this table because it is not just a physical table, it is table where the image of the world as it is supposed to be – this ideal called the kingdom of God – is created if only a moment in time because at this table there is a place for everyone.

In a little while, I will invite you to come to this table. I do it because I know that there is a place for you here. I know you are weary, that you have been labouring hard, plowing or tending sheep in the field, but there is a place at this table for you. I know that there have been people in your life who have treated you like a worthless slave or told you that you ought not to feel good about yourself because you have only done what you ought to have done, but there is a place for you at this table. You belong. And not only you but all sorts of people who are looked down upon, cast out and forgotten have a place at this table and we all need to get to work to invite them to take their places because this table is a sign of the world as it is supposed to be.

I know you can't see that world yet. In many ways it seems more elusive today than it has ever been. But that doesn't matter, because the righteous will live by their faith.