

October 14, 2007  
Pentecost 20

*"The Lord's Answer to the Why Question"*

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### **HABAKKUK 1:1-3, 2:1-4**

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**T**he oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received. <sup>2</sup> How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? <sup>3</sup> Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. <sup>NIV</sup> **I** will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. <sup>2</sup> Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. <sup>3</sup> For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. <sup>4</sup> "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright-- but the righteous will live by his faith—

Not all the news you heard this past week was bad news. Maybe you heard about the story with the headline, "Golden Retriever Nurses Stray Kitten." Jimmy Martin found an emaciated six week old stray kitten and brought it home to his family. Their golden retriever named "Honey" took an immediate liking to the meowing kitten, licked it and loved it. After a few days of mothering the kitten, the dog started lactating naturally even though it had been 18 months she had given birth to pups. There was even a picture of the little kitten eagerly nursing her much larger new mom. How different this is from the vicious dog that chases down a cat and violently shakes it to death.

Just as the animal world has its happy and sad moments, so it is with people. When the violence really gets bad, especially in times of war, we wonder why God does not step into the stream of human history and use his power to stop the violence and hatred. During WW2 people lost their faith in God because they could not believe he would allow such places of human suffering such as concentration camps.

Have you ever had to ask the "why" question when you saw someone suffering more than any human being should ever have to suffer? We ask "why" when we see vicious outbursts of violence and man's inhumanity to man. We ask why when violent acts of nature such as a tsunami kill over 300,000 people. We ask why when we see how violently God's Word is twisted and turned and tortured so people lose trust in salvation itself. In the Revelation John tells how he heard the souls of the saints of God crying out, "How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Even they wondered why the Lord was waiting so long to return."

This morning we want these words from the prophet Habakkuk to help us answer this tough why question about violence and suffering in our world. I don't know of any one who has ever named their child "Habakkuk." Daniel, Joel, Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah are familiar names still used today. I even knew an elder in the church named "Zephaniah" but everyone called him "Abe." Habakkuk is hardly a household name, but that should not keep us from listening to an important answer on why God allows human pain and

suffering at the level he allows.

## **Why is there so much violence in the world?**

Habakkuk saw more than his share of violence and suffering. "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds." It was everywhere on the streets of Jerusalem, this terrible violence. It was bad enough to have other nations defeat and destroy God's people, but it was even worse when they started attacking each other. Parents were sacrificing their children to false gods, even burning them in the fire. People worshiped the Lord in morning and worshiped Baal and other gods in the evening. Here is how the Lord described the violent acts of idolatry against him: "The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women need the dough and make bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods and provoke me to anger." (Jeremiah)

What bothered Habakkuk was the silence. "How long must I call for help but you do not listen?" Have you ever had to dial 911 to report an emergency? You don't expect to be put on hold, or hear a busy signal, or have an answering machine kick in. So it is with God. When we see very bad things happen to good people we love, we expect God to hear our prayers immediately and deliver them from their troubles. But God appears to remain silent, even aloof, even far removed from the troubles. That is not true! He sees everything. He cares and he always has a higher purpose to accomplish what we cannot always see. I am holding in my hand a needlepoint of Jesus the Good Shepherd. The back side is a tangle of knots. The front side is a beautiful work of art. God knows what he is doing and how he will accomplish our salvation for us, even when life is a jumble of knots.

Have you ever wondered why God would allow certain people to live and be so successful when they totally wreak havoc with the lives of people? God is all powerful. He could easily cause a child to die to keep him from becoming one of the worst monsters in world history. God allowed people like Hitler and Stalin to become powerful leaders who used their power to destroy the lives of millions of people. Or think of something even worse, such as teaching incorrectly about the Lord. Why didn't the Lord find a way to have the prophet Mohammed die young? Instead he brought false teaching into the world that has led Muslims world wide to believe the Koran and believe in a plan of salvation that depends on works, not on the mercy of God who sent his Son Jesus to die for us.

## **The righteous shall live by faith**

Are you ready to hear God's answer to Habakkuk's question about God not doing more to stop violence in the world? Habakkuk was more than ready to receive an answer from the Lord. "Then will I stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I have to his complaint." Habakkuk wanted answers, answers only the Lord could give, just as Job wanted answers as to why the Lord would allow him to experience the level of suffering and pain he did. He is willing to wait patiently as someone waits on a wall guarding a city at night.

Dear Christians, this is what the Lord wants us to do when we have questions about why

he allows the level of violence and suffering in our world to go on and on and on without some intervention. He wants us to wait on him for an answer. Psalm 46 says "Be still and know that I am God, I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

The Lord has the answer to our concerns about levels of extreme pain and suffering. He tells the prophet, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." The message was so important it had to be written on a tablet, not just a little scrap of paper that could be lost. It had to be carried by a herald into all the world, for all people to see, not tucked away in a secret hiding place. Everyone needs to hear what God told Habakkuk. Take a deep breath. Are you ready to hear God's answer to this question of why all the suffering?

He says, "See he is puffed up, his desires are not upright- but the righteous will live by faith." Violent people are like this balloon that I have blown up. They are puffed up with how important and powerful and mean they can be. But you know what can happen to a balloon when it comes in contact with a pin. Some of the proudest and most puffed up people in the world have suddenly found themselves totally deflated and destroyed. "Man proposes, but God disposes." "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." Even the mighty Babylonians who proudly took the gold and silver utensils from the temple in Jerusalem, and proudly drank from these golden goblets, heard the truth from God one night during a drunken orgy, "Mene, Mene Tekel Parsin." You have been placed in the scales and found wanting.

It is always God's plan to strip away our pride in ourselves and replace that false hope and trust with trust in him for our salvation. How true are these famous words, "The righteous will live by his faith!" These are the words that grabbed a hold of Martin Luther and changed his life. All his life Martin struggled with the question of , 'Why?' especially when he applied it to his salvation. He grew up believing that he had the power within himself to live before God by being more faithful. The answer to his problem of suffering and pain in his heart was to try to be a better person. He called on God to help him, but there seemed to be no answer. "Why, why, why, if you are God are you not doing more to help me get rid of sin and help me have a clean conscience?" He wrote in one of his hymns, "Yea, deep and deeper still I fell, life had become a living hell, so firmly sin possessed me." That's what happens when pride takes over our lives and we think we as one poet said, "I am captain of my ship and master of my fate."

The voice of the Lord called to Martin Luther with these important words from Habakkuk which are repeated in Romans and the book of Hebrews, "The righteous shall live by faith." These words delivered Luther from false hope and trust. At first it was just a soft whisper in the deepest recesses of his soul that called him to forsake his works as the source of salvation and turn to Jesus alone. "The just shall live by faith." Then it became louder, "The just shall live by faith." Then it became a mighty call to salvation, "The just shall live by faith." He was transformed by these words to trust not in himself and his works, but the works of Christ, the perfect death and perfect life of Jesus that justifies us and gives us peace with our God.

Against the back drop of all the pain and suffering in the world, amid the storms and fires and earthquakes, sickness and surgeries and suffering, the voice of the Lord calls out to the world, "The righteous will live by his faith." The Lord wants everyone to put their

trust in what he has done for us to rescue us from our sin. If 300,000 people died in a tsunami, if 30 million died in WW2, or if a friend you know dies of cancer and she is one of the nicest people you have ever known, the fact remains unshaken: "The righteous live by faith." The message needs to be written on a tablet and shouted to the world. In the most painful moments of human suffering, God is there, bringing people out of darkness into the light of his love. He longs to have the gift of his Son Jesus our greatest joy in life. In the darkest hours of world history the light of God's love shines brightest. Against the back drop of human suffering on the stage of life the voice of Jesus calls us to faith with these compelling words, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."