

Sermon for the Anglican Gathering Service in Pembroke

Holy Trinity Church

August 15, 2004

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Are you a fighter or a flee-er? Do you hide or hit out when threatened? Do you demand attention as if its your right, constant help as if everybody owes you--or do you crawl into yourself, into your nest and go silent, paralyzed until trouble goes by? Sure, these are the sinful extremes--but by nature we usually go in one of these two directions when we feel threatened. Some rare few are blessed with very relaxed personalities-- "relentlessly happy" I've heard it called. You people drive me crazy! Yet even there, we can find the selfish extreme of not caring about others' pain, of not showing mercy.

That's not been my problem. I'm too likely to enter too far into the pain and take others down with me. I'm a definite flee-er. This June, when General Synod made its affirmation of the sanctity of same sex relationships, I was shocked, I was scared. That this could happen, that God's people would go against God's Word so blatantly, so publicly - like David, I felt betrayed and longed for the wings of a dove, that I could fly away and be at peace (Psalm 55:6, 12-13). I'd been born into God's family in the Baptist Church, learnt to trust and follow Him there--but it was in the Anglican Church I'd learnt how good life with God could be. I'd found grace, I'd found healing for my soul and between heart and mind, I'd found closeness to God, all through the Anglican Church--and now it seemed to be turning away from this God, my God, the God of the Scriptures. I wanted to fly away like a bird--a mourning dove, mostly--I kept bursting into tears.

Many of us are feeling this grief, this dislocation. And many are also facing more individual threats--to health, to jobs, to relationships, to life. I could name a few in serious battles, but for the sake of privacy, I won't--so Nicolette, Mike, Tom, you can relax! There are other struggles going on, some long sieges--with mental illness, other illnesses, poverty, injustice in the workplace, nastiness at school or hardheartedness at home. We get over the shock--but what do we do with the evil, the stupidity, the confusion, the tiredness? Even the relentlessly relaxed need to know.

We've been looking at Old Testament characters in these evening services. Now we deliberately call them characters, not heroes because most would make very lousy role models--except that most who sinned big, repented big--and God loves that wholehearted turning back to Him. Tonight we're hearing from Habbakuk, a prophet we don't know much about. We do know he was a prophet dismayed, horrified by the mess his people, his world was in. God preserved the record of a very important interaction the two of them had; you'll find it on p.868 in the pew Bibles if you'd like to follow along.

This short book seems very modern even though Habbakuk lived about 2,600 years ago: it unfolds with startling images that flash before us, impassioned dialogue, loud noises and emotional music - a heartfelt interaction between God and one of his confused faithful.

First chapter, verses 2-4: "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.

Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted.

Habbakuk takes his pain and confusion to God. His society is a mess--decadent, selfish, unjust, unrighteous--and these are God's people, gifted with His Law that they are

confounding, perverting. These are the people of whom God said,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." - Exodus 19:4-6

Notice how this prophecy is contingent--much of prophecy is. The prophecy coming true depends on our fulfilling our part. Habbakuk sees that God's people are falling horribly away from God's purpose for them--and he is floundering, crying out to God.

And God responds. He doesn't say, "Shh, be quiet. You're a prophet, you should know better. Don't bother me with your piddily human emotions!" Nor does God respond, "Oh dear. Is that really what's going on? So sorry, I've been slipping up. Really, I should have gotten your approval about this." No, God neither has to justify Himself to Habbakuk nor anyone else; but neither does God shut Habbakuk out. Instead, God takes Habbakuk into His confidence; He trusts Habbakuk with even more to handle, God draws him into what He is doing.

Chapter 1, verses 5-7, 11: Look at the nations and watch--
and be utterly amazed!

For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe,
even if you were told.

I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.

They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law unto themselves...

Guilty men, whose own strength is their god.

Like Job, like Jeremiah, like Stephen, like John at Patmos, the early Christians facing persecution--God's answer is not easy. It's not immediate relief, not even explanations. It's an encounter with God Himself, it is God drawing His people into His purpose, into His heart.

For Habbakuk, this is not what he wanted to hear, expected to hear. God is going to use a nation even worse than Habbakuk's people, Judah, what's left of Israel. This is amazing, awful! Things are going to get worse! God goes on, describing the nation He will use--like leopards, like wolves, like eagles--these powerful, violent people are going to be God's tool? God's solution is hard to take.

Imagine a big pause here as Habbakuk takes it in. God's ways are beyond him.

He pauses--and he worships.

Chapter 1, verses 12-13a: O Lord, are you not from everlasting?

My God, My Holy One, we will not die.

O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment;

O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You cannot tolerate wrong.

Habbakuk acknowledges God's eternity and holiness, God's overruling in human affairs. He tries to understand.

Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?

Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (verse 13b)

If God takes no pleasure in evil, if evil can't be around God (Psalm 5:4), then why does He tolerate this darkness here and now? Well, there's this little matter of the fall--God created us humans and gave us authority and responsibility in this earthly sphere--and we chose and keep choosing evil.

Habbakuk is asking God to fix it, fix it now.

He realizes God has the power, the authority, the freedom to do what He is saying, to use the Chaldeans--Babylonians you may have heard them called in grade 5 or 7 history. They are just a tool, an evil permitted by God. But why Lord? Why use this greater evil to deal with evil?

Ever had things get worse? Ever wanted to know why?

This continent is reacting to the threat of terrorism. Anybody tried to cross the border lately? Or get on an in-Canada flight? It's much more complicated than it use to be. We headed off to Alberta and B.C. last summer--wedding, family, friends--by airplane from Ottawa, and I forgot to bring my passport. And I've no driver's licence (long story, yes, I'll get one soon). Thankfully Ottawa Airport security took my 20 year old High School Bus pass as photo ID!! And Muriel there rescued me by sending out my passport to Calgary so I could come back.

Security is tight. We have to pass through metal detectors; our baggage, our pockets have to be inspected. Things we don't think are any problem--like Tim's (my husband's) nail scissors!--can't pass through. No evil gets around God--why doesn't He do a security, a sin check now? Get rid of all evil, all danger now. Don't let anything evil on this flight of life. Fix it God; fix it now.

Habbakuk brings his complaint, his confusion to God. Bring yours. He worships, he asks his questions, he makes his case--and then he waits.

Chapter 2, verses 1-2 I will stand at my watch and station myself at the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

How often do we cry out, make our complaint, beg for help--and keep nagging or yelling at God, maybe not outloud but emotionally we run amokor harden--or else we cry for help, for answers--and then we run. Habbakuk waits. He looks. He sets himself where he can receive, he stands at his watch and stations himself at the ramparts. Wait on God. Pour out your heart and then look--look in the Scriptures, look for God's answer, listen. Place and keep yourself where you can receive--don't flee in fear, don't let your anger storm so that you miss the answer.

Habbakuk and God have a great relationship: there's honesty, endurance--and a passion to know and be known. This is our God. He invites us into the same relationship. He tells Habbakuk to write His response down, write it big, plain, for everyone to see--everyone who wants to hear, who wants to know.

God's answer?

Chapter 2, verses 3-4 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.

The time is set. Justice is coming. Peace with righteousness will be--see verse14, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." No more confusion, no more human evil--just the glory of God untarnished, shining over us. It may seem to be delayed, you may feel it's not coming--but wait for it, it is sure, it is coming, right on God's time--so hunger for it, long for it, work for it. This isn't heaven yet. Don't give in, don't give up.

The danger is we will give up--that we will cease to long for God's glory and will settle for our own. We'll set up our own righteousness, our own ways of getting the power or peace we want--ways that go against God, that leave Him out, like the self-indulgent Israelites, the power hungry Babylonians. They set up their own standards, made their own metal detectors, said everything's fine, we've got our own reality.

Yes, then and there, now and here, God isn't disarming the wicked yet; God isn't removing all sin and tragedy from around us and in us.

But you know what? They're not on the flight yet. This is just the airport with everybody wandering around. The real flight, the real adventure is heaven--and nobody's getting there with out a reality check in with God. In God's great vision to John, exiled to Patmos while other Christians took the easy compromise with the earthly powers, God showed John at the end of His revelation that only those who will not lay down their sins, who will not accept washing, cleansing, forgiveness from God through the mercy of Jesus, they are the only ones who don't get into Heaven, into the beautiful city. Now, I love the Valley--but this is one city you don't want to miss, this is the fullness of love and glory, this is the fullness of God. You don't want to miss this flight.

Don't you miss it--God fills this second chapter with woes that come to those who do it their own way. God says don't you run that way, don't you set up your own reality. Be my people; not just in name, but in likeness, in closeness.

Jesus made the same plea, to a rebellious Jerusalem: "...How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing..." Matthew 23:37; Luke also.

But you were not willing--the longing of God, the sadness of lives lived apart from the love for which they were made--but you were not willing.

So take your wings and fly to God. Fly to God, not away. Still the moaning, the demanding, stop the kicking and screaming that push God away. Come to rest under His wings, trusting, still. Here in the closeness we become like Jesus, who waited on God and only did what He saw the Father doing; here we are gathered close, still enough to hear, to feel the heartbeat of love now, even while the storm still blows.

This is our place. We run to Him, pour out our hearts and in humble trust, we wait. Be still: The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him (Habbakuk2:20). Be still, be silent before the vision of God found in Scripture, raised in song, spoken in the silence. Let His peace descend like arms, like wings around you.

Are you willing? Are you willing to be gathered up under the wings of Jesus?

Habbakuk ends with a whirling revelation of God as a warrior coming to save His people. This is a vision set to music: the term "shigionoth" sets this chapter apart as an art form, some think a very emotional musical form. Habbakuk continues with his eyes on God, not the situation; yet he continues to pray for the situation, remembering God's mighty works of old and asking "Renew them in our day, in our time make them known." Then a glorious description of God coming through nature, coming victorious to crush evil and deliver His own--a mighty warrior. John on Patmos saw the wounded lamb. The writer to the Hebrew Christians, reeling from persecution, cried out, in the midst of suffering, confusion, evil, cried out "But we see Jesus!" (Hebrews 2:8,9). So we can laugh, we can picnic, we can play--because we see Jesus. Wounded lamb for us!

Habbakuk, still surrounded by decadence and injustice, facing suffering to come, looked to God. His body is still affected, humanly weak with the stress--but he glories in His God.

Chapter 3, verses 16-18 I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.
Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Those figs, those grapes and olives, fields and stables--Habbakuk's health, his well being, his life depended on them. But he determined to look to God, to enjoy God no matter what.

What do you think your life, your happiness depends on? What relationship, what job, what affirmation, what ease of pain? What knowledge of the future or guarantee are you counting on? Will you like Habbakuk stand and wait for God alone? Will you lay down your anger at injustice, your fear of pain and find your joy in God your Saviour?

As we do, He remakes us--that last verse, Habbakuk whispers with passion: "The sovereign LORD is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights." Are you willing to be gathered up? To let God remake you, to let God carry you on eagles' wings and bring you to Himself. These depths, these heights of trusting God--let it begin with making your stand of faith in this life, before all need for faith has passed, singing your song of worship with this people of God. Let us pray.

Lord,
make us a people sufficient for this time. We want to trust and obey you, stay close to you as a church, as your people. Draw us in to what you are doing. Renew your deeds in our time, O Lord. As individuals, we are facing issues that scare us, anger us. Is there any evil, any injustice that you want to ask God about? He wants you to bring it to Him, to begin to trust Him, worship Him even in the midst of evil--Thank you, Lord, for the many who are doing that even here tonight. What glory it is to you Lord, the praises from your bruised and battered saints!

For some of us, we need to bring down those things that are keeping God out--that are causing us to hide from you or rail at you.

-It could be a sin we've wanted to say was okay, but Lord, you're making it clear we've got to let go of it. Just agree with God that it's wrong, ask His forgiveness--and He is mighty and merciful to save through the cross of Jesus.

-For some of us, it's the wrong around us, wrong done against us that we've let come between us and God. Our fear, our anger keep us from accepting that God would use even this hardship, tragedy or injustice in our lives. Will you let God weave it into the pattern of your life? Will you let God use it for His glory, for good? Just tell Him you will trust Him, just say, "God, your will be done." He will lead you on.

See those hands, nail pierced, and place your life, these times, in His hand.

Jesus carries the sin, takes away the sting of suffering, its seeming pointlessness --to the cross.

Gather us close Lord God.

Holy Spirit, help us know the love, the holiness, the presence of God in Christ, saving. Hide us in your love. Let your peace and love flow through us to this besieged world. We love you, we trust you and we will rest under your wings. Be glorified in Your church for Jesus' sake, who died to make this possible. Amen.