

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 19:1-10; II Thess. 1:1-4, 11-12

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4. Little is known about the prophet Habakkuk, either from external evidence or from information supplied by the book named after him. We know he lived during the last days of King Josiah (640-609 BCE) and under the reign of Jehoiakim (609-588 BCE). The internal evidence of the book indicates that this prophecy was written around 598 BCE, during or after the first invasion of Judah by the Babylonian Empire (1:1-4). Habakkuk is named in the apocryphal book of “Bel and the Dragon” as “Habakkuk, son of Jesus of the tribe of Levi” (vs. 1); that would mean that Habakkuk would be in Israel’s priesthood. That possibility makes sense of the prophecy, because it is written as a liturgical lament, and would likely have been used in the formal worship in the Temple, sung by the Temple singers and priests (of which, Habakkuk could have been one).

The prophecy is written as a conversation between the people (either Habakkuk or the Temple singers) and God. It begins with a lament by the singers.

“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” (1:1-4).

Babylonia is not yet identified as the culprit. But in this opening stanza of the lament, we learn that Judah is both besieged and wasted. “Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise”. Civil disorder racks the nation (“the law becomes slack”), the law is being used to subvert justice (vs. 4) and the established order is being undermined and is in disarray. Chaos abounds everywhere. There is no working civic authority because Judah has been invaded by a powerful force that is creating chaos, with which the reigning Jewish authorities cannot cope, and that invading power threatens the very existence of the nation.

Of course, the only event at this time in Judah’s history that fits this description was the invasion of the nation by the Babylonian army that resulted in Jehoiakim being removed from the throne and a puppet king being installed in his stead. That surmise on our part is confirmed by verse 5.

The remainder of chapter one continues the conversation between God and Habakkuk (or the Temple singers), 1:5-11 being God’s response to their original lament presented in verses 1-4; God’s response is then followed by another interchange from Habakkuk (vss. 12-13). In summary, God presents the ruthlessness of the Babylonian army as it impacts Israel, stating that the Achilles Heel of Babylon is their blind self-assurance. That self-possession is their great strength, but it is also their fatal weakness, because they are susceptible to their own hubris – and that will be what will eventually destroy them as a nation (which, in reality, is what happened nearly 60 years later). Habakkuk is not particularly impressed by God’s argument; his response is, in essence, “God, if they are so bad, why have you picked them to sit in judgment upon us – your people?” Consequently, Habakkuk demands that God should deliver Judah in the face of Babylonia’s lust for power. That demand, in turn, moves us into chapter two.

Yahweh responds, “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner many read it. For 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. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough. They gather all nations for themselves, and collect all people as their own” (2:2-5).

How God responds to Habakkuk is profound. What God is essentially saying to Habakkuk is “Keep your eyes on the prize!” Don’t lose sight of God’s vision for Israel and the world that God has graciously shared with you. Babylon may seem invincible. Judah may seem of no account. But “keep your eyes on the prize”! Do not lose sight of the fact that God is at work, doing through you, in you, in spite of you, and in your midst what it is that God intends to do. God’s will shall be done on earth, as it is already done in heaven. The building of the shalom community is inevitable. And, in fact, it is right on time! It may not appear that way, because we take our eyes off the prize and allow ourselves to be intimidated and overwhelmed by all the evil that is around us. But, in reality God knows what he’s about, and he is in the midst of doing his work. So, if the acting out of that will seems to tarry, “wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay!” The real issue is not whether God will accomplish what God intends to accomplish. The real issue is whether we will allow ourselves to truly trust God!

But how do “keep our eyes on the prize”? There are two ways of responding to God’s stewardship of civilization, two ways that we can deal with God’s vision for the world and even our nation or church.

“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith” (2:4). One can approach this vision of God’s intention for Israel and – through them, the world as “the proud” whose “spirit is not right in them”. These are they who are most concerned with accumulating power, wealth and domination. “Like Death, they never have enough” (2:5). They are so caught up in themselves and their own agenda that they cannot see God’s vision or embrace it for their own. What will happen to them God will tell the reader in verses six through 20.

But there is another entire way of responding to the inevitability of God’s vision. “The righteous live by their faith!” This expression was used by St. Paul nearly 800 years later to describe the doctrine of justification by faith. But that is not what Habakkuk was here proclaiming when he penned those famed words, “the righteous live by their faith”.

What Habakkuk is declaring here is that the truly godly way of responding to the inevitability of the coming of God’s vision for humanity is to receive it by faith. The one who truly believes God, and believes in God’s vision is the one who is made “righteous” (or “blessed” or “experiences justice”) by God. It is their faith in the utter dependability of God that makes them faithful to the heavenly vision and thus acceptable to God.

Psalm 119:137-144 is, as a portion of the acrostic, that portion of Psalm 119 starting with *tsade* (“ts”). It mainly deals with the “righteousness” of God that brings authenticity to the Torah and to its committed follower.

“You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgments are right. You have appointed your decrees in righteousness and in all faithfulness. . . . Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth” (119:137-138, 142).

This is the standard translation of this passage (NRSV). However, the Hebrew word used that is here translated “righteous” is the Hebrew word, *tsedeq*. Righteousness, in its English usage, is defined as “acting in accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin” or “morally right or justifiable”. Therefore, righteousness means, in English, private or moral behavior.

But that is not what righteousness means in the Hebrew language. Rather, the same Hebrew word is used (*tsedeq*) for both righteousness and justice. It means compensatory equality, public justice, clemency and compassion. It has the nuance about it of acting in obedience to the Law (i.e., practicing compensatory equality in both economic and political actions) and acting ethically (i.e., compassionate mercy toward the poor and the victims of the misuse of power).

Therefore, if we are seeking to communicate the meaning the Hebrew writers were seeking to communicate when they wrote Psalm 119:137-138, 142, it should be worded, “You are just, O Lord, and you are upright in your judgments. You justly appointed your decrees, and were faithful in your actions. . . . Your justice is an everlasting justice, and your law is truth”! Reading it this way more authentically captures the intent of the writer.

This, then is a stanza of Psalm 119 dealing with the justice of the Law. It declares that the justice the Law requires each Israelite and the entire nation (including its political, economic and religious systems) to practice is a justice God himself practices – for it was God who freed the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, led them through the wilderness, made covenant with them at Mount Sinai and brought them into the Promised Land. Therefore, because God acted justly and has incorporated justice throughout the warp-and-woof of His Law, so Israel is to practice justice in all that it does and especially toward those who are the weakest and the most vulnerable among them (widows, orphans and aliens).

Despite his single-minded devotion for justice, however, the writer also reveals his capacity to recognize the inherent dangers a commitment to justice can bring. “My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words” (vs. 139), he writes. The author recognizes that there is a tender balance between zeal and fanaticism. Zeal can “consume” one, so that a person or community, in his or its single-minded commitment can act so unthinkingly and fanatically that they can end committing great atrocities in the name of God (cf. Exod. 32:25-29; Gen. 49:5-7). So it is that the author recognizes this “Achilles-heel” of zeal for justice, and prays against it.

But if one lives his life in commitment to God’s Law, and especially centers himself in working for and living out its calls and commands for justice, “trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight. Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live” (vss. 143-144). The psalmist recognizes that adherence to the

Law and especially working for the justice it requires is no guarantee against difficulties or hard times. “Trouble and anguish” will “come upon” everyone; this is simply the reality of life. But if one centers himself (even in the midst of his troubles and anguish) in God’s commands, he will find delight in the midst of darkness, and understanding that will shape his actions, judgments and vision for the remainder of his life.

Luke 19:1-10 is the well-known story of Zacchaeus.

One of the most brilliant juxtapositions of poor and rich about which Luke writes is the story of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-25) and the tax collector, Zacchaeus (19:1-10). In these two stories, Luke demonstrates how one rich man can have all the right theology and community respect, and yet so worship his money that he is condemned to hell, while the other rich man can have all the wrong theology, be ostracized by the community, and yet be delivered of his money’s domination of him through his repentant response to the poor. Jesus’ lesson to the theologically orthodox, liturgically correct Pharisees, scribes and priests is obvious.

Thank God the story of Zacchaeus is in the scripture! Otherwise, all we would have is a never-ending story of the rich who, because of their greed, are beyond redemption. This story is meant by Luke (who is the only gospel writer to tell it) to be in tandem with the story of the rich young ruler (which all the synoptic gospel writers tell).

Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector in Jericho. Luke calls him a “chief tax collector”, which meant that he headed a team of subordinates who collected the Roman taxes from rich and poor alike. Like all other tax collectors at that time, Zacchaeus could legally charge excess interest on the taxes and thus embezzle significant sums for himself. That he did so is implied in his statement, “If I have defrauded anyone . . .”. Because tax collectors were also, in a profound sense, “legal crooks”, everyone, including the religious and political elite, despised them.

Jesus was passing through the city on his way to Jerusalem, where he was to keep an appointment with a cross! As he walked through the crowd gathered to see him, he saw Zacchaeus – and he invited himself to lunch! This, in itself, was unacceptable, because Zacchaeus was considered unclean because of his occupation. But this did not stop Jesus!

We do not know what transpired in their table conversation. But we do know the outcome. As a result of his having lunch with Jesus, Zacchaeus declared, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (19:8). Jesus responds to Zacchaeus’ act, “Today salvation has come to this house. . . . For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” (19:9)

It is important to notice the order of the events here. First, Zacchaeus deals with the domination of his money. Then, he is free to receive the gift of salvation from Jesus!

Salvation came to Zacchaeus’ house, not because of his generosity, but because his declaration indicated that his money no longer stood in the way of his relationship with God. In essence, his money had been Zacchaeus’ god. But in this single pledge, Zacchaeus had demonstrated that, because he had been touched by Jesus, his money would no longer control him. He could

happily give it away and could recompense those whom he had cheated. Zacchaeus had removed money from the throne of his life. And now God could claim that throne!

It is particularly important to note the specific commitment Zacchaeus made to redistribute his money. He went far beyond the Jubilee requirement. Leviticus 6:1-5 requires that the person who defrauded another person reimburse the defrauded person the full amount plus 20% interest. Exodus 22:1-4, on the other hand, required doubling the reimbursement if one defrauded another of livestock rather than money. If, on the other hand, you had slaughtered or sold the livestock, then you were required to reimburse it four-fold. Zacchaeus, in essence, applied the law of slaughtered/sold livestock to his money. By law, he only had to reimburse the amount defrauded plus 20% interest. In reality, he reimbursed the defrauded people four-times the amount defrauded. So Zacchaeus placed upon himself the most stringent demands of the Law. In a profound sense, because of what Jesus was doing in his life, he had become a *hilarious* giver (the actual meaning of the Greek word translated “cheerful” in Paul’s call to the church to be “cheerful givers” in II Cor. 9:7). Zacchaeus – and his priorities – had been transformed by a meeting with Jesus!

These two stories of the rich young ruler and the transformed tax collector are meant by Luke to be in tandem. “In the first story economic concerns stagnate faith. In the second story faith drives the economic agenda. Here are two contradictory responses to the gospel, opposite reactions to the poor. On the one hand, good theology, no Jubilee, condemnation. On the other hand, scant theology, Jubilee, salvation.”²¹

These Lukan stories of two rich men present an essentially common message. The story of the Rich Young Ruler demonstrates clearly how the rich are so captured and enslaved by their wealth that they cannot even act upon their own salvation. The Zacchaeus story demonstrates how the rich oppressor can be delivered from the control of his wealth through his repentant response to the very people he has oppressed. Thus, in this story, Jesus intentionally links a person’s salvation to his acts of social justice! In these and other stories in Luke we see amplified Jesus’ call for the restoration of the full Jubilee in Israel’s life and practice.

As American Christians, it is our tendency to dismiss the implications of these two stories about wealth. But we dismiss them to our own spiritual peril. “You cannot serve God and wealth”, Jesus said (Luke 16:13). But it is precisely a signal that our money does possess us when we become defensive about this biblical message and begin to seek ways to ignore Jesus’ call to us to use our wealth to address poverty in the world.

II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12. In the two letters St. Paul wrote to the little Christian church in Thessalonica, he talked about the steadily increasing persecution that Christians would face under the Roman Empire. Paul’s letters to the Thessalonian Christians were written around 50 A.D., 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and 20 years before the Gospel of Mark. But their theme reminds us that, even before Rome began intensely persecuting the church, the suffering of Christians had already begun.

The book of Acts tells us that Paul and Silas sailed to the city of Thessalonica to plant a church. Why would they go to Thessalonica? Simply because it was, next to Athens, the most important city in the Grecian world. It was a city of 200,000 and it dominated the two major Roman roads outside of Italy, one road carrying Roman and Grecian trade to Asia Minor and the other carrying Asian trade goods to Rome.

“It is impossible to overstress the importance of the arrival of Christianity in Thessalonica. If Christianity was settled there, it was bound to spread East until all Asia was conquered and West until it stormed even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in the making of it into a world religion.”¹

The start of Christianity in Thessalonica didn't go very well. Acts 17:1-9 tell us that Paul and Silas arrived there and spoke in the synagogue on “three Sabbath days”, or in other words, over a three week duration. There, Paul proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and Savior. Luke tells us, “Some of (the Jews) were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Gentiles and not a few of the leading women” (17:4). These people formed themselves into a church, but before Paul and his companions could spend much time instructing them in the Christian faith, some Jews formed a vigilante mob, sought out Paul and Silas, and not finding them, dragged Paul's host – a man by the name of Jason “and other believers before the city authorities, shouting ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king, named Jesus’ (17:6-7)! Eventually, Jason and the others won back their freedom, but Luke tells us, “That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea” (17:10)!

Paul and Silas were run out of Thessalonica by the Jews and Romans less than a month after their ministry had begun. But in those few weeks that Paul was with them, the apostle “developed a deep familial affection for the Christians in Thessalonica” (2:8; 3:12). Fourteen times, he addresses them as his brothers and sisters. He is like their “mother” (2:7) or “father” (2:11), and he compares his separation from them to that of an orphan separated from its family (2:17). Such affection caused Paul to be so concerned for these new Christians that he had an intense desire to return to Thessalonica but was unable to. Therefore, he sent his faithful companion Timothy (who was not a part of the original missionary party of Paul and Silas and would therefore be unknown to the Jewish and Roman persecutors) to encourage and support the members of that community in their Christian life. Timothy returned with a generally positive report about the situation, but he seems to have hinted at a deficiency in the Thessalonians' life of faith (3:10). (also presented to Paul what he saw as a disturbing struggle that they were facing) (3:10). This report prompted Paul to write his letter”².

The struggle that the Church in Thessalonica was facing was coping with increasing persecution and their consequent suffering. Apparently, the Jewish harassment that had led to the arrest of Jason and the escape of Paul and Silas had expanded into continual oppression, not only on the

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 181.

² Raymond F. Collins, “The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians”, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2003) , p. 2115. Parenthesis is my own.

part of the Jews but also with the Romans. What Paul wanted to convey to the Thessalonian Christians was that persecution need not defeat them because, whereas suffering can destroy, it can also heal.

Paul begins by congratulating them on their spiritual depth and liveliness as a congregation. “Your faith is growing abundantly”, Paul writes in our New Testament lesson for today, “and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.” (II Thess. 1:3b-4). These Christians, Paul is saying, make up a spiritually and relationally vigorous church, one in which their life together is the sort of community that God wants all churches to be.

But what is causing such a manifestation of faith and love? Paul points out that their “steadfastness and faith” is occurring precisely at the same time as they are experiencing “persecutions and afflictions”. The persecutions they are facing as God’s people are severe afflictions, not simply visited upon these Christians by local residents of Thessalonica. Instead, it is a part of a growing resistance to the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. It is a foretaste of what will later become intense persecution of the entire church.

What is significant about this passage, however, is that Paul states that it is the “persecutions and afflictions” that the church is sustaining as the reason why the church is also experiencing growth in “steadfastness”, “faith” and “love for one another”. That is not surprising, when you stop and think about it. It is the discipline of suffering and persecution that causes Christians to realize how much they need the support and faithfulness of each other, and to embrace it and generate it for one another. When things are going smoothly, your relationships of support and faithfulness to each other are a luxury; when things are going badly, then you desperately need the support of each other.

Paul then moves onto his second point. He writes, “This (persecution) is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.” (1:5b). This is a profound insight. The persecution you Thessalonian Christians are receiving from Rome and the Jewish rabbis is being done to weaken your resolve and to destroy the church. But instead, what is happening as a result of this persecution is that God is making you Thessalonian Christians “worthy of the kingdom of God” (1:5b). The suffering you are undergoing is a spiritual discipline. This persecution is actually molding you into a better Christian; it is building your character, building your resolve, building your dependence on God, building your commitment to one another. Therefore, these afflictions are not only going to be used by God for good; it is contributing to the strengthening of God’s people in the building of the kingdom of God. That kingdom is closer than it was earlier, precisely because of the church’s willingness to endure persecution and suffering. Suffering that was meant to destroy you is actually helping to spiritually form you into the person God wants you to be so that God’s kingdom can be advanced.

But then Paul concludes his argument. It is true that your persecution will help form you as a Christian and as a church. But that doesn’t justify the persecution you are receiving! No matter the good that comes out of it, such affliction is still wrong; it is still unjust, it is still evil, it is still

a radical abuse of the power invested by the people in Rome. Therefore, Paul declares, those who misuse their power to hurt the people of God and the powerless must be held accountable for such misuse. That is what the last part of our New Testament lesson for today is all about. Paul writes,

“It is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us” (1:6-7a). Simply put, what Paul is saying is that God will afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

What Paul is presenting in this passage to the Romans, to the Jewish aristocracy, to the Christians in Thessalonica is one of the most profound insights of the Christian faith. This is it: “You cannot hurt a child of God, and get away with it.”

If those who hold power – whether it is the emperor or whether it is a local magistrate, whether it is a CEO of an international corporation or whether it is a clerk in a local business, whether it is the State Superintendent of Schools or whether it is a local school teacher, whether it is the “Great Father” in the White House or whether it is us our own parents – if those who hold power use that power in a way that intentionally brings pain or suffering or defeat to a “child of God”, they will pay for it. They will pay for it in two ways. First, they will eventually get theirs – what is popularly described as “What goes around comes around” or, as Paul puts it in our New Testament lesson for today, “you will suffer the punishment of eternal damnation”! But also, they will pay for it in another way. The very act of bringing intentional hurt to another person or group of people does something to you. You don’t go away unscathed from that action of intentionally hurting another person. You become more calloused, you become less sensitive to the pain of others, you become more immune to hearing God’s call to you. Subtly, without realizing it, by intentionally hurting another, you have gradually become more evil!

Who, then, can be saved – for all of us hurt others? Paul concludes this chapter by saying that God is at work in all people, but especially us who are active children of God, making us worthy of our call, forgiving us of the hurt we cause others, and enabling us to carry out the good mission toward which God has called us, even in spite of our evil tendencies. Thus, by such work both in and through us, Jesus is glorified through us and the grace of God is carried out into the world!

(Copyright © 2010 by Robert C. Linthicum)

²¹ Kraybill, Donald B., *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1990), p. 125