

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Habakkuk: In Our Own Time”

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Habakkuk 3:1-2

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We continue today in our summer series through the minor prophet Habakkuk, again grateful to Pastor Mark in his organization of this series, focusing on some of those challenging questions of the so-called “problem of evil”: if God is so good and so powerful, why do all these horrible things keep happening? That question dominates this short book of Habakkuk. If you were with us, you’ll remember that the first two chapters of the book are an exchange between the prophet and God. Two different cycles of the prophet offering a question or a complaint, “Why is this happening God? Why haven’t you done something about it?”, and then God’s response.

But as we start the last chapter of the book, which we’ll look at in smaller pieces, we find the prophet approaching the Lord in prayer. Let’s go to God’s Word together. A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth. Habakkuk 3:1-2.

O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Merciful God, we pray for reminders of your mercy this day. We pray that by your Spirit you would reveal you mercy to us anew, and that we would be led to see it in news way, in our interactions, in our homes, in our city, nation, and world. May your Word to us be an ever-present testimony to your great work of grace. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Revival. There’s something a bit old-timey about that word, isn’t there? Like it belongs to a different era. When I hear the word, I think “tent revival.” Now I know those still happen, but I can’t help but picture some swelteringly hot summer day, a tent out in the field, some sweaty preacher going back and forth on the rickety stage going up, pleading with the worshipers to turn to God in their lives. A small choir behind the preacher. Lots of hand fans out to fight the heat and humidity. A bit of call and response preaching. We don’t do so much of that here, but can I get an Amen?

Then depending on what kind of revival we’re thinking of, we might picture folks jumping for joy in the aisle in between all the folding chairs set up out in that field under that tent. Some impromptu testimonies or conversions might hop up on stage unannounced. And along the way,

a true revival of spirit could take place within a small group of people, stirring them to new or renewed faith, a true outpouring of the Spirit of God. And the potential for this sort of thing to happen can lead to a longing, a deep longing for one to happen again. And some of you may have some experience with that sort of setting, maybe you yourself have been to a tent revival or three. My grandmother had. And a powerful, lifelong impact on her life too.

Eh, but that sort of thing doesn't happen anymore. I mean, yeah, it happens, but come on. It doesn't happen around here. That's a thing for times long past. People today are too cynical, too busy. There's no mystery anymore, no space for faith. Everything is available, visible, reported, overexposed, overanalyzed, and overstimulated. Maybe there was a time, but not now. Then again, you never know. There's a longing in the notion of a revival, just embedded in the word. It's not just living; it's living again, coming to life again, seeing again that which once was and yet in a new way all the same. So there's at once this deep longing for how things had been, along with an excitement for how things could be.

There's something of that in just these couple of verses in Habakkuk, here at a turn within the book. After the call and response of the first two chapters, with Habakkuk bringing before God the questions and complaints of his heart, as to why these horrible things were happening yet God was silent, and then God responding, chapter three takes on a different flavor. It opens with the introductory words, "A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth." That last word "Shigionoth" is thought to have been a musical instrument, and along with a few other indications, suggest that this might have been used as a prayer sung in the temple at one point or another.

But then in the second verse, "O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work." There's a reverence here, a holy fear, of what the prophet knows of the sort of works the Lord has done before and is capable of, of God's track record, so to speak. Then the prophet prays, "In our own time," or, "In the midst of years," literally, "revive it; in our own time, make it known." It's this prayer that the works of God, the very work the prophet knows God has done and is capable of, would be witnessed in his very time. I love the literal phrasing here too, "In the midst of years." Sometimes we can get caught into thinking, well, God did all these amazing things long ago, you know, Bible times. The Red Sea, the cross, creation itself. And then we might think, Oh well God's going to do amazing things in the end, end of the world stuff, making things right, all things new. Almost bookending how we consider the scope of history, but maybe we don't recognize as much or look for or hope for all the ways God may be at work right now, not long ago or some day when, now, "in the midst of years," "in our own time."

And then the prophet says, "in wrath may you remember mercy." Remember what Habakkuk has been asking about up to this point. He's been questioning why God has not acted

when so much wrong has been happening. “Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?” we heard last week. He’s asking for God’s action. He’s asking for God’s justice. But then it seems he remembers the testimony of all God has done, and in a powerful way that he can’t exactly imagine, he hopes to see the justice of God enacted, yet also with mercy.

It's the sort of combination that seems at odds with itself. How can you have justice and mercy at the same time? It’s hard for us to entirely imagine it. We might think, justice is setting something right; mercy is letting someone off the hook. Both have their times, but they don’t go together. And yet the prophet invokes the amazing work of God, remembering mercy as he also sets things right. And he asks, “In our own time, [right now], revive it.”

There’s a movement here for the prophet, one that we might feel as well. If the first couple of chapters in this short book are sharing the frustration of someone witnessing great harm that seems to be done with impunity, at the expense of the righteous, the faithful, then here we start to see a movement from frustration into faith. Now don’t hear me wrong. There’s faith in the frustration. Have you ever thought about that? That there’s something faithful in a frustration with God? That’s a longer topic, but look at the psalms, at Job, at Christ himself, and there is something faithful about crying out, “Where are you God?”

But here it seems it’s moving into something else: a hope that what God has done before, he would do again. There’s faith in remembering all that God has done, all that God has brought about in justice and mercy, and in hoping that it can happen again.

Maybe that’s how you feel right now. Maybe this whole church thing, this whole faith thing, this whole Jesus thing was something that meant a lot to you earlier in your life, but now, you know, you’re not so sure. There are parts of you that deeply long to have that again, but then other sides of you just can’t get there, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, you name it. Maybe you were burned by the church before. Maybe there was a time when you cried out to God as Habakkuk did, “Where are you God?” but only heard silence in response. Maybe there was a time when faith felt betrayed. Maybe all of that. But still deep down, you’d give anything to feel the faith that you had before. Maybe you deep down, you join the prophet in his prayer, “In our own time, Lord, revive it.”

There was this Christian historian named J. Erwin Orr. Irish by birth, traveled and evangelized around the world, and then taught for years at Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles. And his expertise, as it happens, was the study of revivals. He combed the testimonies left to us by saints of revivals in the past. He’d travel to parts of the world studying reports of revival around the world—and it very much is still happening. He’d look for the common traits, what do they tend to have in common. There’s a whole lot that we could go into there, but among

the compelling things he said is this: “Whenever God is ready to do something new with his people, he always sets them to praying.” He always sets them to praying.

Notice that it’s not some kind of spiritual euphoria, dancing in the aisles, jumping up and down. What he found was that revivals tend to start quite calmly. From what I understand, there was something of a revival here, something like 20-30 years ago if I’m informed correctly. And was it folks jumping up and down, speaking in tongues? Nothing necessarily wrong with that, but in actuality it was a peace, a conviction, a rededication to the care of the church through Stephen Ministry. A sense of spiritual peace and conviction, coming about in prayer. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that this longing for a revival here in Habakkuk takes place at the beginning of what, a prayer. There’s something about being drawn to the Lord in prayer that tills the spiritual soil.

Some of you may be familiar with the so-called Asbury Revival or the Asbury Outpouring, taking place over 16 days at Asbury University, not far from Lexington, Kentucky. What most headlines note is the tens of thousands of people who were drawn to what ended up as continuous worship service in the chapel on the campus. Lines out the door, drone footage, folks coming from hundreds even thousands of miles away just to be a part of it, leading to response revivals on other campuses around the country and even globally. There was excitement in it too. So much is said of the faith of this generation or that generation, but here in this pocket of Kentucky was this powerful outpouring of new and renewed faith, led predominantly by college students.

Lots to get excited about. But was it dominated by dancing in the aisles, jumping up and down, that sort of thing? Maybe some folks did that, but reports said that it felt much calmer than that, lots of time in prayer and quiet reflection, a palpable sense of purpose about it, not their purpose, but God’s, a sense that God was at work in ways they all knew he had been before and could be, but there’s something powerful in the witnessing that sort of thing happening, “in our own time.” And you know how it all started, what kicked the whole thing off? It wasn’t some blinded-by-the-light miracle conversion. It was a small group of students sticking around to pray after a daily chapel service, when one student opened up to the rest of the group about the hold sin had upon their life, confessing, and that confession was met with grace. Justice and mercy meeting, and “when God is ready to do something new with his people, he always sets them to praying.”

This is a word for anyone who has felt frustration at what seems like God’s lack of action or indifference, anyone who has wondered why God does not seem to act like he’s been said to act, anyone who feels that sort of thing could never happen here, with us, with me, anyone who feels a longing for faith, new or renewed, but then thinks, “I could never feel that way again,”

May we be drawn to the Lord in prayer, and may you see a revival in your own heart, in our own time. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.