

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Habakkuk: Water Stomping”

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Habakkuk 3:3-15

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Next week we'll wrap up this summer series in the prophet Habakkuk, so a first word on what will come after that.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the whole Bible is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It’s powerful in its own right. “The gospel in miniature” as Martin Luther put it. But something perhaps just as striking is the conversation it takes place in, an exchange between Jesus and a compelling figure that pops in and out of John’s Gospel, a man named Nicodemus. It’s a conversation all about faith and questions and doubt and hope, and if you or someone close to you has ever felt questions like that yourself, come join us in a couple weeks.

Now, as we turn to this last chapter in the minor prophet Habakkuk, this short book tackling one of those challenging questions of faith, doubt, justice, all wrapped up in what’s known as the problem of evil, God shows up in a big way. Let’s go to God’s Word together, **Habakkuk 3:3-15**.

God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low. I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent curtains of the land of Midian trembled.

Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord, or your anger against the rivers or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory?

You brandished your naked bow; sated were the arrows at your command. Selah You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. In fury you marched on the earth; in anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Sovereign God, we come to you this day acknowledging the weight of hardship, of grief, of evil, of disorder within our lives and in the lives of those we love. We pray for your presence, that you would make yourself known, that your assurance would be with us and at work through us. Reveal this to us by your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Peppa had to stay inside one day because it was raining out. But the sun then came out, and she went outside to play.

Yes, for those familiar with the kids show, you've already spotted this as Peppa Pig, about a family of British-accented pigs, with Peppa, her little brother George, and Mummy and Daddy Pig.

Upon going outside, since it had been raining, Peppa came across a muddy puddle. This was a discovery, because Peppa loved muddy puddles. But Mommy Pig came to her and said, "If you jump in muddy puddles, you must wear your boots." So Peppa did so, and then jumped up and down, stomping and jumping and splashing the muddy water in the muddy puddle around.

Then her little brother George came out, and Peppa repeated to him the same thing her mommy had told her: "George, if you jump in muddy puddles, you must wear your boots." So George did, and then they both jumped and splashed and stomped the muddy water in the muddy puddle, the mess getting all over each other because they were splashing the muddy water onto each other's clothes and face.

Then, they decided to go inside. Of course they were covered in mud, tracking mud all over the floor of the Pig family house. Daddy Pig was in the kitchen, and he saw them come in. Daddy Pig is supernaturally patient, tells them, it's only mud, and that they'll get cleaned up.

And then all of them, Peppa, George, Mummy, and Daddy, all put their boots, head back outside, and they all jump in the muddy puddles, jumping and splashing and stomping the muddy water all over each other and everywhere.

Until at one point Mummy Pig says to Daddy Pig, "Oh Daddy Pig, look at the mess you're in." They of course all giggle, and that's the end of the show.

Nothing too deep about it. Just an episode of Peppa Pig about muddy puddles. But there was something that action, of stomping on that muddy water, and then of that final giggly statement, "Oh Daddy Pig, look at the mess you're in."

This passage in Habakkuk includes a bit of stomping in muddy puddles, if you will. Well, not really puddles, but at least the stomping on water, and at least a bit of inference about the mess it can all make.

V. 15: "You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters." Trampling the sea, as if to conquer it, to subdue it. The sea, now that's quite the muddy puddle. Might be a bit bigger of a scale. But just the thought of trampling or stomping on water, that's the image here.

Does that typically do much good? Is it all that effective? I mean, sure, if it's a little puddle and you jump up and down in it, the water will splash out and maybe eventually all of it will get splashed out far enough that the puddle will go away, but that's only with pretty small puddles. (Not that I've ever seen this happen, say, a small boy make a beeline for whatever puddle is nearby with non-waterproof shoes just to jump in it until it's dry. Speaking only theoretically here.)

But you get a puddle or any gathering water of any size, jumping up and down in it or stomping in it, with the intention of subduing it or conquering it, isn't going to do a bit of good. Sure it might be recreational, but you're not changing much. If the puddle is deep enough and wide enough, anything you splash out of it is just going to flow right back to where it was. And if we're talking about anything of much depth at all, there's not much stomping or trampling to be done. You're just going to sink.

This is all obvious stuff. You can't really trample water. We all know that. And yet there's this imagery, speaking about the Lord, "You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters."

This whole passage consists of what is known as a "theophany." You might have thought, "What kind of symphony?" A "theophany," a fancy word meaning an appearance of God. This is what happens, in other words, when God shows up. Theophanies are scattered throughout the prophets, visions of God appearing, and they're almost always these powerful, even cataclysmic scenes.

Hear how it starts, in v. 3: "God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran." If those places don't mean anything to you, they're locations in the desert south of Judah, where Israel had wandered for forty years. So it's like God is coming in from the wilderness.

Then it continues: "His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden." This appearance is awesome—in the truest meaning of the word, kind of terrifying, really.

And this appearance isn't for the sake of showing off. God's here to do work. And in various combinations, this vision of God's appearance pivots between God's dominion over creation and his judgment of the nations. Hear some of the soundbites:

V. 6: "He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered." Even just there in one verse it goes back and forth.

V. 10: "The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice."

V. 12: "In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations."

You get the picture. God's here to show what he's made of. That's what these "theophanies," these visions of God's appearing, are about: God revealing who he is and what he's about. No one vision captures all of the nature of God in totality, but just in this glimpse, what does it say about the Lord? That even the seemingly impossible, untamable is under the authority of God and will one day be set right.

I wonder how many of us have been at sea when the sea is pretty rough. I'm sure some of us have. I haven't. Most I've ever experienced of rough seas was on a sailboat with maybe 6-8 foot swells. Apparently, if one is a mariner, that's really not a big deal. But it sure felt like a big deal to me.

But then, every so often on my social media feed, a reel of ships going through really, really big waves, like in the North Sea or something, pops up. I don't know what it is about that's fascinating to me, but apparently I pay attention otherwise the almighty algorithm wouldn't keep showing them to me. But it's these quick clips of typically enormous ships, ships you'd imagine could weather any kind of storm, but the waves are just tossing them around like rag dolls, and the ship's just trying to hang on. There's something terrifying in the chaotic power of that.

To the Ancient Near Eastern mind, that's what the sea meant more than anything. Yes a source of fish and all that, but first and foremost, the sea was chaos. Untamable. How are things described in Genesis 1? A formless void, darkness covering the face of the deep. It's this constant, all-consuming churn of things. And often enough, that churn of things gets associated with the churn of nations, of empire, like being tossed around like a ragdoll in the face of one empire rising then another and another.

So what power there is in the declaration of this vision that God is in mastery of the sea, against all waters for that matter. V. 8: “Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory.” And again in v. 15: “You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters.” Where no one could possibly bring about some kind of order or purpose, God is in control.

It’s why when Jesus walks on water, it’s not just, “Oh look at Jesus. He can walk on water. No one else can really do that.” It’s saying, “This man can control that which no one but God can control, so just who is he?”

God is trampling the untrampleable, stomping the unstompable, taming the untamable. Whether it’s mountains, whether it’s rivers, whether it’s nations, whether it’s seas. That’s what God’s about. That’s the hope in this vision of God’s appearing.

So as Habakkuk has been challenged by questions of evil, of justice in an unjust world, of faith in the churn of nations, of evil, of God’s deliverance of the righteous who are preyed upon by the wicked, these overwhelming questions with no clear answers, here’s this vision of a God who tames the untamable.

What is that untamable thing in your life? That intractable issue that overwhelms you.

It could well be the very thing that’s connected here in this passage, the churn of nations, of global turmoil, the problem of evil, that may weigh heavy on your mind, especially now with uncertainty in our country, an election year, war abroad. You look at it and you wonder, how can anything good come out of this mess? God, where are you?

Or it could be on a smaller scale, albeit no less overwhelming. Maybe it’s turmoil in your family, in your workplace, in your school. I mean, my goodness, it’s not like churches are immune to this sort of thing either, not by any stretch. Maybe it’s facing an illness, a hard diagnosis, for yourself, for a spouse, a parent, a child. Maybe it’s facing the terrible burden of addiction. Maybe it’s in guiding and raising a child or coming alongside a friend who’s troubled. Maybe it’s a marriage that feels like it is beyond hope. Maybe it’s in the wake of grief, after the loss of a loved one, after which everything feels like it’s up in the air, unsettled. You look at it and you wonder, how can anything good come out of this mess? God, where are you?

Whatever it is, you’ve faced the sea, the churn, that intractable, untamable challenge in your life.

And yeah, at one point maybe we felt like we could handle it. After all, as a people, we’ve gotten better at dealing with the sea. We have bigger ships. Better tools and skills and navigation. If it’s a giant muddy puddle, we may have better boots for it. But at some point, it’s not something we control.

And if you’ve come to the point of exasperation, indignation, desperation, you name it, if the water’s come over the top of your rainboots and you hear someone saying, “Oh Daddy Pig, look at the mess you’re in!”, hear the Word of hope, in v. 13, declaring of the Lord: “You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed.”

Help is coming. The one who is mighty and able to tame the untamable is coming and will set all to right.

So take heart, and look for him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.