

Today's sermon is based on three short passages from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. I would bet this is the first time you have ever heard a sermon based on Habakkuk - - for some of you, maybe the first time you've heard of Habakkuk! Its one of those short books in the Bible you can easily miss.

But even though the book is very small in size, it's concern is not small at all. Most of us have struggled (or will) with hard, painful and frightening times in our life that don't come with easy answers or solutions.

Why does God allow some of the things that happen? Why not just take them away? When you or I or those we love suffer, we may become overwhelmed and search for an answers to questions that may not have answer. Habakkuk was in this situation and could make no sense of it. It's as if he was walking through a very long, dark tunnel.

Years ago, I took a bike trip in southern Wisconsin near Sparta, the bike trail following an old railroad bed through the winding, wooded hill country. On that trail is an old RR tunnel a quarter of a mile long. At least then, there were no lights in the tunnel and we had none on our bikes either. Once deep inside, things began to get a bit disorienting. First of all, its completely dark so one can't see anything around except the light at the tunnel's end, which appears as a bright star in outer space. We had to get off our bikes to walk because we could not see the path, the walls, or anything but that distant light - - just feel our way, slowly and carefully, trying to stay in the middle or a trail we could not see. As we walked I truly understood that old expression "light at the end of the tunnel". The light kept me going. I would never have entered such a tunnel without it, being without any flashlight or bike light of my own.

Habakkuk feels like he's in a dark tunnel alright, but in his case, he can't actually see ANY light. If I titled his prayer to God it would be: "What if we can't see a light at the end of the tunnel?" You might answer: "Don't go in the tunnel?" The trouble is, of course, as much as we human beings try to avoid dark and scary tunnels, life gives them either through our own foolishness or sin, or, through no fault of our own. I would therefore imagine that some of you may feel this way even as you worship here. Many of you remember such a time when you did.

Tragedy strikes and a little child dies and sadness is so deep you can't imagine feeling happy again. You are caught in serious addiction and feel hopeless. You are displaced during a horrid civil war and barely survive in a horrid refugee camp.

For Habakkuk the situation was this: he witnessed a powerful, evil and godless nation utterly destroy Jerusalem and hack to pieces the sacred Temple, killing many of his fellow citizens and carting off everything of value, including its leaders, into exile in far away Babylon. Habakkuk struggles to find hope and can find no answers or relief to this terrible situation. That's why he opens his writing by seemingly shouting at God: " O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear?" The tunnel he's walking will be dark for a long time. So how does he continue this journey in faith and hope?

This morning we read three short passages from Habakkuk - - one passage from each of its three chapters. You will notice that Habakkuk is not in the same place by chapter three as he is with tin the books beginning. Even so, Israel's situation has not changed nor will it in his lifetime it turns out. So what can his prayers teach us when the situation causing the suffering does not have an immediate solution?

Let's listen carefully to how Habakkuk wrestles with God so that he is helped to walk this dark tunnel in a way that caused his Jewish community to include his book in the Old Testament. Habakkuk begins with a sad lament about how tragic and hopeless is his people's plight. Its called a LAMENT.

The Bible tells us to "pray in all circumstances". But what if our feelings and words and situation are anything but worshipful ? What if we are in a dark place, overwhelmed, angry, bitter like Habakkuk was? Yes, here too we are told to pray and "tell it like it is". Be honest. Let it fly!

Actually, the Bible contains quite a number of such writings, in the Psalms, the Prophets and even in the words of Jesus on the cross, when he quoted a lament Psalm (22) crying out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

You might ask - - why don't I hear much about laments? That's because we don't use them much in worship. Maybe we should. Suffering and anger, bitterness and remorse are a part of life and we are mistaken if we think these expressions are not acceptable to God. If you look closely, a number of lament psalms get pretty raw (like 137).

Stop to think about how life-giving it is that God would invite us to be honest in God's presence and not feel like we have to pretend. We know from counselors and artists that truth is where healing begins. And if you like history, as I do, you may have noticed that evil empires like Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, where horrible things were done to millions of people, always tried to hide the truth and censor artists and newspaper articles that try to express the suffering and the truth That's why their official art doesn't speak to the human spirit, because its fundamentally dishonest and suffocates life — you won't find it in art museums except as an illustration of the times.

Dimitri Shostakovich, the great Russian composer during Stalin's time, constantly got in trouble for trying to express in his music the true grief of the people under the thumb of the secret police and the Gulag. He was expected to sound heroic and joyous about life under its regime. So he walked a fine line in being true to his soul and disguising music that passed the censors anyway, but spoke deeply to ordinary Russians. Evil always comes with lies and thrives in cover-up. But God helps us face what is real with light, truth and love. So Habakkuk's first sentence is indeed acceptable to God when he cries: "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you not hear?!"

CHOOSING AND LEARNING TO TRUST GOD

But lamenting is not enough just in itself. After Habakkuk puts in words the trauma of what he and Israel are going through, he makes a choice for faith: He describes it as if he is standing watch on top of a city wall, looking out in the distance for a messenger from God, to see what God will say to this. And in his vision he hears this reply: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. 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 not delay."

Might Habakkuk have been a bit disappointed? Or hopeful? God says (in effect) - - "my special word for you (revelation) will come but you'll have to wait for it. It will not be false and it will come."

Patience. Hang in there. Not now but yes, there will be an answer... isn't that what the life of faith is often about? We are given promises but they unfold over time. In fact, many of the greatest works of God in people of faith have taken many generations to reveal themselves. That means that as we watch and look to God we also must learn to trust. In a sense, we learn to see a light at the end of the tunnel by faith. That means day by day we learn to take one step at a time doesn't it? And some of you here have learned to do exactly that haven't you? "We walk as yet by faith" says the prayer, or as Paul writes: "we see now as through a glass darkly, but then will see face to face."

When we walk through dark tunnels, we do come to choices we must make about who and what we will trust. Habakkuk makes the kind of choice required for all long and difficult journeys in life - - one that people like Abraham and Sarah, David, Elijah, Peter and Paul and pretty much every great leader of faith HAD to learn— to persevere in faith. That's because our faith has a horizon at eternity. But as we walk in faith and look to God, there comes an UNEXPECTED GIFT, something which Habakkuk expresses near the very end of his writing. See if it catches your ear as it did mine?

"I will wait patiently... 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 SAVIOR. THE SOVEREIGN LORD IS MY STRENGTH, HE MAKES MY FEET LIKE THE FEET OF A DEER, HE ENABLES ME TO GO ON THE HEIGHTS."

Notice that Habakkuk now accepts the possibility that the suffering will continue indefinitely but now he has found an even deeper joy in simply knowing God and the power of God's strength. In other words, even in the midst of life's difficulties, where situations may not be to one's liking, God gives the gift of Himself - - God's Presence. (This may be what Jesus meant when he said: "Come to me you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.") Our burdens may not be light in themselves but in giving oneself over to God's care, we are released to learn what we could not imagine looking at things outside of faith.

I noticed this powerful sense of strength and joy in God as I read an account (by Robert Ellsberg) of Sojourner Truth, a slave who escaped to freedom in New York after having been sold and re-sold as a slave, never to see again her eight siblings who were also sold. Her power came from her relationship to God, something she was introduced to her by her mother, who promised that she could always seek God's help in difficult times. Isabella, her given name, changed her name to Sojourner Truth after sensing a call from God to devote her life to preaching and challenging the injustice of slavery.

One time she was present at a gathering with another famous abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglas, who reflected discouragement about the prospect of ending slavery. Having ended his speech on a discouraging note, Sojourner Truth interrupted him right then and there and said "Frederick, is God dead?"

This is the first Sunday of Advent and you might wonder why we would prepare for observing Christ's birth by reading Habakkuk? Actually, I think this is a great text. God's greatest message - - the one Habakkuk died never seeing, but certainly expecting, is His presence among us in our Savior Jesus. Let us be reminded that as sweet and gentle a story as Christmas can be, its a strong story too, a story of God's faithfulness across time and God's abiding presence to

sustain the likes his servants like Sojourner Truth and so many others down through difficult times. We can be reminded that many of the struggles in faith involve things redeemed only into eternity, whose horizon we look to in faith. This is why Paul can write with conviction: “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”