

“How Long, Lord?”

Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #6

Habakkuk 1:1-4

Have you ever been on vacation with young children? My family spent some time in the car and on our bikes in Leelanau Peninsula last week. You’ve probably had a vacation or two like that when you’ve covered some long distances. What’s the #1 question a child asks in the car? “How much longer is it?” For a while, I could get away with two answers, no matter how far away we actually were: “fifteen minutes” or “about an hour”. Sadly, due to GPS and smart phones, now my children don’t accept either of those answers.

We live in a world that expects answers to all of our questions. Impatience is found in all of us. Sometimes that impatience is motivated by our own selfish desires, but sometimes it comes in response to other people’s pain. We cry out, “How much longer?” We crave relief – from a long car ride, from boredom, from pain, suffering or injustice. The desire for cessation of misery is in all of us.

The past few weeks our church has been on a journey through the twelve “minor” prophets, Hosea to Malachi. They are short, often unfamiliar books that are nevertheless part of our Bibles. We may ask, why study them? My simple answer is: they reveal things to us about God and about ourselves.

For example, these stories tell us that God usually raises up a prophet in times of distress and impatience. While every prophet is unique, their messages are similar, and often fall into two categories: either God desires the nation to change, or the nation desires action from God.

Habakkuk’s message belongs to the latter. Habakkuk is the proverbial voice in God’s back seat asking, “How much longer is it, God?” In fact, Habakkuk is rather unique: it is the only prophetic book where the prophet speaks first, questioning God. Usually, God calls the prophets first. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and others, were called by God in unannounced and surprising ways, causing them to say, “What? Why me? Are you sure, God?”

I am somewhat surprised by Habakkuk’s confidence and brashness. He acts a lot like Job. Habakkuk basically says, “God, there’s a problem here. And I’ve got some questions.”

Have you ever questioned God? Have you ever wondered why God, who is good (e.g. Psalms 107:1, 119:68, 145:9) allows evil to exist in the world? I have.

It is painful to read the daily news. This week in Texas, there was another school shooting. In Israel, dozens of Palestinians were killed and thousands injured. Researchers found plastic garbage at the bottom of the Marianas Trench in the Pacific Ocean. A local woman, wife, mother of three, with no criminal record, was deported, without any notice to her family, back to the country she sought asylum from. On any given day, there is distress from drugs, divorce, abuse, poverty, unemployment, and pollution. All of which leads us to ask the same question: Why?

This is not a new question. This is the struggle of humankind. In theological terms, the word for this struggle is *theodicy* – the attempt to understand the existence of evil in a world under the authority of a good God. Theodicy is the fancy word for, “Why is this happening? Why don’t you act, God?”

“From start to finish, Habakkuk is concerned with the question of theodicy. Why is there injustice in the world if God is good and God is powerful?”¹ Look at some of Habakkuk’s questions. Are these not our own?

“How long, 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 wrongdoing?...
Lord, are you not from everlasting?
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?
Why are you silent while the wicked
swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”

(Habakkuk 1:2-3, 12, NIV)

Scholars don’t know exactly what relief Habakkuk was waiting for. The scripture is unclear. Who was his enemy? It may have been the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or even the corrupt King of Judah, Jehoiakim. The point is, this enemy was greater than Habakkuk could manage; an enemy that could only be defeated by God and no one else.

Do you know enemies like that? Sometimes they have their own names: ISIS, Taliban, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, al-Qa’ida, Boko Haram. (Listed as terrorists by the US State Department.²) Sometimes we give them more

¹ **NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI.** ABINGDON OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES. JULIA M. O’ BRIEN. Copyright © 2005 by Abingdon Press. (ministrymatters.com)

² <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

general names: opioids, human trafficking, kidnappers, drug lords, depression, school shootings. Whether they are specific people or general epidemics, they are pervasive, unable to be stamped out, like an invasive species attacking all the good and natural parts of our environment. No matter who the enemy is, it all comes down to the same thought: “God, we feel powerless against them. Do something.”

Sit with that tension for a moment. When have you complained? Against what? What threatened you?

Although Habakkuk gets a brief first word in, he is not the only voice in this scripture. God responds to Habakkuk, but God’s answers are somewhat non-specific. God certainly does not answer Habakkuk’s questions directly, God only says,

“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.” (Habakkuk 1:5, NIV)

That’s your answer, folks. “Fifteen minutes or about an hour.” In fact, if you read on in Habakkuk 1, God talks about raising up another problem, the mighty and ruthless army of the Babylonians. No short, pat answers. No final solution. So, what are we going to do?

First let’s look at Habakkuk’s response.

“I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.” (Habakkuk 2:1, NIV)

Habakkuk asks questions, and then he waits. In all his hurt, his pain, his wondering, and his thirst for divine justice, Habakkuk waits patiently. And note what Habakkuk does not do. “[He] never questions the assumptions that underlie his concern; he does not question the existence of God, the power of God, or even the goodness of God. Rather, the prophet questions God’s willingness to act.”³

Is it OK to question God? Habakkuk’s answer is decidedly, YES. And he is not alone. Job, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David, and Elijah all asked God questions. In the New Testament, Mary, Zechariah, the disciples, and Paul all gave voice to their wonderings.

It is OK to ask God why. However, it is not OK to complain that God does not act the way we think God should act. Here are a couple of reminders from the Apostle Peter, who himself used to be a very impatient disciple:

“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.” (2 Peter 2:9, NIV)

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9, NIV)

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief.” (2 Peter 3:10, NIV)

³ **NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI.** ABINGDON OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES. JULIA M. O’ BRIEN. Copyright © 2005 by Abingdon Press. (ministrymatters.com)

Peter tells us, God’s timing is not our timing. That’s OK. In faith we can say, God does have an answer. God will answer us. God will address injustice.

In the meantime, we have a job to do. Listen to these words from Jesus in Luke 21.

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:34-36, NIV)

Our job is not to complain; our job is to prepare ourselves, to not be weighed down by anxiety. Our job is not to miss what God is already doing in the world. And our job is to be persistent, going back to God and the Word again and again, insisting that love and justice be both God’s priority and our priority.

This truth is illustrated in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18.

[Jesus] said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’

“And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’” (Luke 18:1-8, NIV)

Like Habakkuk, the widow insists on justice. Jesus told this parable so that we would know how to pray: insistently. Pray in God’s will, and never, never give up. Be active in your faith, fight against injustice in ways that are in line with Christian teaching: resist violence with non-violence, love your enemies, seek to do good, and give an answer for your hope. Combine your faith with good deeds. (James 1:18)

So what does all this have to do with Pentecost Sunday? Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4) His disciples wanted to know if it was finally time for God to restore the kingdom of Israel. (Acts 1:6) But Jesus said this:

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” (Acts 1:7)

When the disciples waited patiently, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They saw God in action because they actively waited and prayed. Like Habakkuk, we have a promise that God will act, but we don’t know the time or day. It’s not for us to speculate. It’s for us to wait actively. How? By giving. By praying. By helping others. By calling people to Christ. By repenting of our own sin. No one is going to think much of our message if it’s given in pride. No one is going to take kindly to us calling them “sinners” unless we first realize that we are in the same boat. We were condemned until Christ saved us. If our message is not grounded in love, no one will listen, no matter how much we thirst for justice.

Will God act? Most assuredly. If you open up your eyes, you will see that God is already acting through people working for justice. Law enforcement, the military, and public servants put their lives on the line for us every day. Scientists

and environmentalists tell us what we can do to alleviate the world’s suffering. Churches, pastors, and missionaries all say, “God is helping us. God is answering us. Join us!”

Just like in Habakkuk’s time, God is being patient. God withholds divine power for the right time. God listens. God cares. God did not judge Habakkuk for his complaint. God prepared for the ultimate answer to suffering in the world: God sent his son, Jesus.

Our mission is to make and nurture disciples of Jesus Christ. It’s how we change the world. One way to disciple people is to listen carefully to their questions, and tell them, God is listening, too. People want compassion and empathy. Help them wrestle with their questions, and if they are not questioning this world, wake them up. We need to show that we care.

In closing I offer this quote from the Billy Graham website, where someone posted the question: Is it OK to get angry with God? Graham says, “The real question is this: Will God get angry at you if you get angry at Him, and refuse to have anything more to do with you? The answer is “No”! Even when we’re angry at Him, He still loves us and yearns for us to turn to Him for the comfort and encouragement we need. And that’s what I pray you will do.”⁴

Memory Verse: Psalm 6:9

"The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.

⁴ <https://billygraham.org/answer/is-it-wrong-to-get-angry-at-god-ive-been-through-some-very-hard-times-recently-and-i-feel-like-god-has-let-me-down-id-like-to-get-past-this-i-guess-but-right-now-i-cant-help-feeling-angry-at/>

Reflection Questions:

- 1.) Have you ever questioned God? Have you ever wondered why God allows evil?
- 2.) If you were God, what is one thing you would do to address suffering?
What would be some consequences of your action?
- 3.) Who are some of your enemies? How do you seek justice in your situations?
- 4.) How does God demonstrate his patience with us?
- 5.) How is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ an answer to the world’s suffering?
- 6.) Are you honest with God about everything in your life? Do you trust God to ultimately answer your questions?