

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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A Frustrated Social One

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon title may be a bit confusing if you are not familiar with the Enneagram. The Enneagram is a personality system that I have found very useful when it comes to mirror-work and self-reflection. The Enneagram has nine different types, each of which has its own challenges and path. The “one” type is often overly concerned with fairness and justice; even known as the “Reformer” or (increasingly less used) the “Perfectionist.” A social one focuses that concern for fairness and justice on systems and communities rather than individuals.

Did you know this is the only time in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) that we get a reading from the book of Habakkuk? It's only three chapters long, so it is understandable that it doesn't get much time in the sun. But it's too bad that we rarely interact with this little prophecy!

It's especially too bad that we don't hear more from Habakkuk as he was quite an audacious prophet. Unlike most prophets, who were sent by God to try and get the rulers and leaders of Israel to act like they were supposed to, Habakkuk's prophecy is more of an interrogation of God. And his preoccupation is a familiar one...at least to me it is.

Based on his writings, it's not hard to infer that Habakkuk was a frustrated social one. How did I arrive at that conclusion? Affinity. You see, I too am a

frustrated social one. I too, have echoed, in my own words, Habakkuk's lament to God: "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

"How long?" We're over 2500 years since Habakkuk addressed this question to God and we can still ask it, can't we? Palestine and Ukraine and the DR Congo and Sudan and Somalia and Myanmar and Nepal and Morocco and Colombia and Detroit and Richmond and New Orleans are all reasons to ask God, "How long?" How long will violence reign? How long will power and pride rule? How long will the poor be oppressed? How long will justice be perverted? How long will the sick and suffering be ignored?

God's response, at least here to Habakkuk, is less than satisfying. It amounts to, "Don't worry, I'm sending the Chaldeans to punish Israel for its sins."² This answer isn't up to snuff from Habakkuk's perspective, and he reiterates his point, "why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?"³

This response is grounded in the Deuteronomic theology of the time. That theology taught that as long as Israel was disobedient to God, it will be punished by God through its more powerful neighbors. But Habakkuk rejects this theology as not in line with a God of justice and compassion. How could a loving and just God use an evil empire to punish the sins of the tiny nation of Israel? Habakkuk wants a different answer than the pop theology of his time.

¹ Habakkuk 1:2-4 (NRSVUE)

² Very loose paraphrase of Habakkuk 1:5-11

³ Habakkuk 1:13b

He gets it! This time God responds by sympathizing with Habakkuk's frustration, even echoing it. God warns evildoers, the powerful and the wealthy, that their actions will have consequences. A great reversal is ordained when the wealth of plunderers will be plundered and the violent will be destroyed by violence.

This foreshadowing seems to mollify Habakkuk and the prophet ends his work with a song of praise. How disappointing! At least for this frustrated social one. I want more than a promise of a future time when wrongs will be righted. I want more than to look forward to a time when the needs of all will have greater priority than the wealth and comfort of a few. So what changed for Habakkuk?

Faith. Faith in a God who affirms that the world is not righteous. Faith in a God who does not want a privileged few to have all the resources of the world while children starve. Faith in a God who loves creation and seeks the flourishing of all life. Faith in a God who so loved the world that the Word became flesh to show us the Way.

Habakkuk, in the middle of his prophecy, stands at the ramparts, the heights of the walls around Jerusalem. That too can help our faith. Trying to see more of the picture. Remembering that God's vision is greater than our own. And emphasizing our faith that God is indeed active in the world. But, and here's the tricky part, God is active in the world mostly through us, followers of the Way.

Like the Gospel reading teaches, with faith we can accomplish amazing things. Though we don't need to waste its power on silly things like rearranging trees.⁴ With faith we can do as we are called. With faith we can live righteously, live in the healthy and connected ways that God wants us to live. With faith we can bring about the righteous kingdom, God's kin-dom.

⁴ Luke 17:6b

With faith we can rest in God's love for us. And with faith we can dare to believe in God's love for the world. Amen.