

## **Honest to God**

Sermon text: Habakkuk 1:1-4

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### **I. The Prophet's Complaint**

There was a man who had a problem with dishonesty at work. Finally his conscience got the best of him and he went to church to confess his sins to the parish priest. During his confession he admitted that he had been stealing building supplies from the lumberyard where he worked. The priest asked him what he had stolen. "Enough to build a new house for the wife and me," the man replied. "I see," said the priest. "And enough to build a house for my son." "Ohhh," the priest replied. "And enough to build houses for each of my two daughters."

The priest thought for a moment and then clarified, "You've stolen enough building materials from your employer to construct four houses?" "And our cottage by the lake," the man added. "I see," said the priest, "This is very serious. I will have to think of a penance that gives you the opportunity to properly repent of your sins. Tell me, my son, have you ever done a spiritual retreat?" The man replied, "No, Father, I haven't. But if you can get the plans, I can get the building materials."

That man had a serious problem with honesty. He was not at all like the prophet Habakkuk, who did not hesitate to speak the truth as he saw it. Habakkuk was honest with himself and he was honest with God. He was also unique among the Minor Prophets. For the most part, the others were called to speak a word from God to the people. What we find in Habakkuk is just the reverse – the prophet speaks a word from the people to God. He complains that the Lord is not preventing destruction and violence. God has not answered the prophet's prayers for wrongdoing to end and justice to prevail. And Habakkuk is honest and straightforward in bringing these concerns on behalf of the people before God.

In fact, the main theme of his book is why does God seem indifferent, at times, to the plight of people? Believe me, Habakkuk had every opportunity to observe people's problems in his day. He was a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah and lived during the time that the Babylonian Empire was regaining dominance in the Near East. Between the years 612 B.C. and 605 B.C., Babylon defeated the two other major powers in the region, Assyria and Egypt. The nation of Judah sat right between Babylon and Egypt, so Judah was caught in the crossfire between two military powers. In the process, Judah became a nation subject to King Nebuchadnezzar and paid him tribute to avoid military occupation by the Babylonian Empire.

Scholars think that Habakkuk was a professional prophet around the temple in Jerusalem. Living in the capitol city, he saw Judah falling apart. He understood the threat of conquest from Babylon, but the prophet also observed conflict and injustice among his fellow citizens. King Jehoiakim was the ruler of Judah from 609 B.C. until 598 B.C., and he set the tone for dishonesty and exploitation of the poor. And that troubled Habakkuk deeply. So much so that he brought his concerns to the Lord in prayer. In his book, we have a record of the prophet pouring out the troubles of his heart before God. The book of Habakkuk is in the form of a lament.

The prophet complained to the Lord that the people were bent on wrongdoing and violence. Strife and contention characterized the relationships among the citizens of Judah. And there was no concern for the poor. In fact, justice was perverted against those who needed help the most. How long, Habakkuk prayed, would God allow the injustice to go on?

## **II. The Lord's Reply**

As we look at the Lord's reply, it is important for us to keep in mind that the prophet's complaint came as a result of his faith in God. Reading through Habakkuk, one cannot help but see his bedrock belief in God's goodness and justice. I mean, the whole book is a prayer – an extended conversation between God and the prophet. Habakkuk was a man of great faith. He was a man who assumed the Lord's goodness and believed that God would work for truth, justice, and the Judean way – or something like that! In other words, his complaint does not question God's existence, or doubt God's justice. Habakkuk comes before God in humility and laments over these things he observes that he believes are offensive to the very nature of God. He is not pointing his finger at the Lord and accusing him of not caring; rather, based on his understanding of God's goodness and faithfulness, Habakkuk is trying to make sense of the bad things he sees going on around him.

And based on the prophet's faith-filled lament, the Lord replies to his questions. Granted, the answer God gives is not what Habakkuk was expecting or hoping to hear, but the Lord does reply to the prophet's heartfelt complaint. God says that he is at work in the midst of the evil and injustice in Judah. But because the people have refused to turn to the Lord and do right, God will allow the unjust nation of Babylon to punish his people. Instead of bringing about peace through peaceful means, the Lord chooses to work toward his everlasting peace using the war that Babylon will bring to Judah. God's people have not practiced his justice, so they will receive Nebuchadnezzar's justice – or lack of it.

That is the essence of the Lord's reply to Habakkuk's lament. It was definitely not what the prophet wanted to hear. But it was the truth. And it still is true today that injustice and dishonesty seem to have the upper hand. Sometimes we have questions of God similar to those of the prophet. It is hard to understand why terrible illness strikes good people. It is beyond our comprehension why children suffer through no fault of their own. We struggle to explain why so many experience financial and emotional hardship. Sometimes it seems that the Lord is turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the needs we see all around us. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people right here in our community? And what are we supposed to do about it?

## **III. The Faithful Response**

Thankfully, Habakkuk models a faithful response for us. His understanding of God's character was the starting point for his questions. He was extremely concerned about the sin and injustice that he observed around him, but his concern did not weaken his belief in the Lord. The prophet was a person of deep faith and sincere prayer. In addition, I would guess that Habakkuk followed through on his faith and prayer with compassionate action.

That, I believe, is the faithful response that we learn from the prophet – developing a deep, personal trust in God that is expressed in a life of prayer. And, based on that honest and ongoing conversation with the Lord, taking compassionate action toward others. Habakkuk is a book for all of us who are living between the time that God reveals his will and the time that the Lord's will becomes a reality. It is a book for the “in between” times. It is a book from a man of faith for other people of faith. In the face of God's seeming unresponsiveness to the needs of people all around us, the prophet encourages us to keep the faith, to trust that God is at work, and to persevere in doing what the Lord calls us to do.

Friends, Advent is about living in those “in between” times. We live in faithful expectation in between the coming of the Christ child in the manger in Bethlehem and his second coming. We live in faithful expectation in between the angels' proclamation of “Peace on

Earth!” and the full realization of the peace and wholeness that is found in the Prince of Peace. We live in faithful expectation that God will keep his promise never to leave us and never to forsake us. We live in an “in between” time.

So as we begin this Advent season, we can choose Habakkuk’s faithful response to the overwhelming problems that people have right here in our community. Instead of being paralyzed by questions of why people go hungry in Sarasota, or why there are homeless children in our area, or why so many experience hardships, we can choose to believe that the Lord is at work in his own way and we can respond with compassion for God’s people. On this first Sunday of Advent when we have lit the first candle on the wreath as a symbol of the faithful expectation we have in the Lord, the prophet’s words can call us to compassionate action.

There are so many ways that our church is acting with compassion toward others: Back to Basics Tutoring; Samaritan Counseling Services; the Early Childhood Center – to name just a few. Another way is through our Food Pantry ministry. If you were here last week, you heard Linda Lehman, one of our Food Pantry volunteers, share about the amazing experience she had in serving an older woman in our community. The woman was hungry and came in looking for bread, but because of Linda and her husband Bill’s compassionate action, the woman left with bags full of food and a heart filled with the joy of the Lord. It’s because of the generosity of our church family in supporting this ministry with financial gifts, as well as volunteering to give of our time, that the Food Pantry is open five days a week, creating opportunities for the kind of blessed encounter that Linda had with that older woman.

Sisters and brothers, we may not understand why God allows people to be hungry, but we can live out our faith in Christ by taking compassionate action that honors the Lord and blesses others right here in our neighborhood. According to Habakkuk, that is a faithful response – honest to God.