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Reflecting on God's Word

Readings: Habakkuk 3:1-7, 17-19 (OT pages 942-943)

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Background of the reading

Habakkuk lived in the period during the rise of the Chaldeans, or the Babylonians as we know them. It was during the reigns of the Judean kings Josiah and Jehoiakim most probably between 612–589 BEFORE Christ.

The book of Habakkuk reveals a man of great sensitivity. His deep concern about injustice and his prayer in chapter 3 show that Habakkuk was characterized by profound religious conviction and social awareness. Judah was in the centre of world politics between Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria. In the 7th century Judah became a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. But when the Assyrian empire suddenly collapsed in the second half of the 7th century, Judah became a vassal

state of Egypt. But when Egypt fell under the onslaught of the Babylonian empire – Judah again was under the control of foreign rulers. The king Jehoiakim was taken prisoner and carried captive to Babylon. It was at this time that Daniel also and his three companions were taken captive to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar reinstated Jehoiakim on his throne, but treated him as a puppet king. During his disastrous reign there was a return to the old idolatry and corruption of the days of Manasseh.

After three years of subjection to Babylon, Jehoiakim withheld his tribute and threw off the yoke hoping to make Judah independent. Nebuchadnezzar sent bands of Chaldeans, Syrians, and Ammonites to end his rebellion. In the year 586 BC the city Jerusalem was invaded, totally destroyed, the king cruelly killed, innocent people losing their lives, and the survivors became captives in a foreign kingdom of Babylon.

It in these unsettling times that Habakkuk was called to act as the voice of God. He asked God why all this is happening. Instead of answering him directly the Lord God says that He is going to raise the Babylonian empire to come and punish the disobedience to His Holy Name. But and this is a big BUT: the Lord said also if they overplay their hand and act in an ungodly way they will be removed too! The prophet Habakkuk faced the violence and injustice of King Jehoiakim as well as the cruel onslaught of Babylonia.

After God have spoken to Habakkuk, he was convinced that God is still in control. Our reading this morning is a prayer of renewed trust in God. He prays that God will remember in his wrath to have mercy! He prays that God will intervene. He remembers the great deeds of salvation God have done in the past. These memories help him to trust God even more, despite his current situation. Our reading is written in a form of a “theophany” or vision of appearance of God and how He as a Almighty God will defeat all His foes.

When He speaks about God he confirms that God is the One who made the covenant with his people at Sinai. He is trustworthy. He kept his side of the covenant while his children deserted him. In our reading God appears as a mighty warrior from the south east, Teman and mount Paran. These are two sites in Transjordanian Edom which are associated with God's appearance at Mt Sinai. He comes in splendour of light, with twin lightning *rays* (or 'horns', themselves symbolizing *power*). *Plague* and *pestilence*, also associated with the exodus and Sinai accompany him.

The section concludes with reference to two southern nomadic tribes who also will be struck with awe and terror at the power of the coming God. The tents of Cushan is a depiction of a tribe that is only mentioned once in the Bible in our reading. The Midianites were desert people who lived in tents like nomads. Some have identified Cushan with the people and land referred to in the OT as Cush, or Ethiopia. The parallel position of "Cushan" to "the land of Midian" in Habakkuk 3:7, however, as well as the location of the other places mentioned in the passage (Teman, Mt Paran) seems to

place Cushan in the vicinity of Edom and Midian, south and southeast of the Dead Sea, which again serves as a reminder of God's presence and salvation in their exodus from Egypt. God's foes could not win against the power of God. Likewise now no nation can overpower God!

Habakkuk is sure of God's Almighty power. He is convinced that despite all the bad things, God is still in control.

Therefore, he concludes his prayer with a song of joy as he affirms his faith in the lord. His circumstances have not changed. The outer world with its evil conduct and rapacious warfare remains the same. God's people remain in time of lamentation. The prophet, however, turns to praise. Why? He has heard God's voice and seen God's vision. He knows the ultimate outcome of history is in God's hands.

The six clauses of v. 17 seem to be in ascending order of severity, with the loss of figs ranking least and the loss of the herd in the stalls causing the greatest economic damage. Figs served as a delicacy in Israel, but their loss did not produce

severe hardship. Grapes provided the daily drink, but again the loss of the fruit of the vine would produce inconvenience rather than privation. The olive crop on the other hand produced oil for cooking and lighting. Grain (barley and wheat) provided for the staple diet of Palestine. The failure of the fields to produce food might mean starvation for large segments of the population. Both sheep and cattle made up much of the wealth of Palestine. Sheep and goats provided wool and the occasional meat for the Israelite diet. Hebrews did not normally eat cattle, but they were used for preparing the soil for planting and other heavy work. Together, the losses spelled economic disaster and devastating loss of hope—loss of their daily provisions, loss of their economic strength, loss of the Lord’s blessing due to their sin.

Habakkuk’s final words express his faith. The Lord would carry him through life. Habakkuk did not trust in the power of other nations or nature or in his own abilities. He trusted in the Lord who is the Almighty God. God who is all powerful provides the needs of life. In a land filled with places to stumble, Habakkuk emphasized the faithfulness of God. The

hind (a female deer) was noted for its surefootedness in high places. Drawing on an image from Ps 18:34, Habakkuk acknowledged the protection of God in every experience of life.

In an unsure world, Habakkuk experienced the joy and peace of trusting the Almighty God. He was assured that God is still in control and of God's help. Amen

MP 549 Our eyes have seen the glory

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon: "Lord, I have heard of your fame;

I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord.

Renew them in our day,

in our time make them known;

in wrath remember mercy."

The prophet of the Lord God Habakkuk had it very bad.

He was torn apart between his loyalty towards his country and his prophetic task from God. He asked the Lord why is all this happening around him? Why is evil triumphing over the

good?

Then when the Lord answered I can just imagine his inner conflict when the Lord said that He will use a “bigger” evil to show his people that He is not going to tolerate their disobedience to Him anymore. Can you imagine when the the reaction of the faithful people that obeyed God with all their being asked Habakkuk: what is the Lord saying? Can you imagine how hard it must have been to tell them what God was going to do? But he realised that the Lord God knows better. Everything is in His hands. He will sort the bad situation. His Word and justice will prevail. All he and the rest of those who are following God can do it to trust and obey.

And once he realizes this: he sing a song of joy!

As we remember today the bravery of soldiers who fought and lost their lives for the good of all humanity and those who are in the present still fighting, we can indeed be rest assured that God is still in control. Evil will never prevail in His

Holy presence. But this is not only true of our past but also of our present.

War has a very ugly face. In Habakkuk's case it was a wakeup call for all the people in Judah to worship and obey the Lord God. Habakkuk learned important lessons namely that God is the ONE who has all the power. And as we remember the wars of the past and the present, all the lives lost in battle, we can learn important lessons namely:

- that whenever humans are in charge there will be poverty, war, hopelessness, decay in contrast to the everlasting kingdom of God where there always is peace, hope, love and happiness.
- not to trust humans but to trust and obey the Lord God above all.
- Evil will never prevail above the common good,
- Everyone who turns against God, will be reckoned with even if they have all the money and wealth of

this world, even if they are “powerful”!

- Everyone who thinks that he/she is in control of his/her life will have to face God at some time in their lives,
- God remains the Almighty God who is and always will be the One that holds everything in His hands.

And since the time of Habakkuk history moved on. Everything happened just as the Lord have said. He did even more. He send his Only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins. But He was also resurrected to ensure that everyone who has faith will not die but live in all eternity with God.

We received this hope and assurance from God. And likewise we can also confess with Habakkuk:

“The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights”

May we go out into the world with this one message: we do not have any strength or power other than the power of faith

that God gave us as a gift. If you sit in this building this morning and you feel that you do not have faith: close your eyes and just say: Have mercy on me! The Lord will give you the peace that surpasses all knowledge and hatred.

May we go out and let our lives be controlled by the Lord God. He definitely knows better!

Amen