

Inquiring Minds Want to Know

Dear friends in Christ: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. There were some particularly disturbing reports in the news this last week. For example, as I was beginning to think about what I'd be saying to you today, we heard about a mother who drowned her two daughters in the bathtub. The poor little girls were only two and four years old. And apparently their mother killed them with cold calculation and no feelings of remorse whatsoever. It's hard to fathom. At the same time, we were hearing about a manhunt out west for a creep who filmed himself sexually abusing a three-year-old. What kind of monster could even think of such a thing much less act upon it? I mean, there's evil, and there is Evil with a capital "E"; and surely, we'd agree that such crimes directed against children fall into the latter category. And what's most disturbing about reports like these is how common they're becoming. Hardly a week goes by when we don't hear about a school shooting, or a kidnapping, or a severe case of neglect or abuse, or some other equally malicious act of violence against a child somewhere in the nation. And of course, the reason we hear these stories is because news agencies know that they attract our attention. We get really upset when a child is a victim. The sad truth is that reporters know we're almost numb to the many more violent crimes being committed against others because we're so used to hearing about them. But even though older victims are perceived as being better able to defend themselves and less innocent than children, I don't imagine that they suffer any less.

Just the same, it's the exceptionally sad and tragic cases that affect us most. We more readily sympathize with the victims and burn with anger at the perpetrators. And for we who are people of faith, they are the kind of news reports that provoke in us the question, "*Why?*" Why does God, whom we know to be loving and good allow people to commit such horrible crimes? If he is all powerful, as we believe he is, then why doesn't he stop them? And why does he allow innocent people to be the victims? If he is the defender of the helpless and the refuge of the oppressed, as he claims, then why isn't he doing anything? Setting aside for the moment the question of the origin of evil – which would be another sermon based on a different text – and acknowledging that evil things with a capital E are being done, why does the Lord allow them to continue? And why does it seem that more often than not the people who do these evil things get away with their crimes?

We are hardly the first people in history with the kind of inquiring minds that want to know. A burden of questions exactly like these weighed heavily on the mind of Habakkuk the prophet. He lived in the waning days of the kingdom of Judah. And they were sorry times indeed—believe it or not, worse than the days in which we live. Judah's king, the sitting heir on the throne of David, was a weak, vacillating, and morally corrupt man. His heart was on his own short-term interests, not the long term good of his people or nation. To pay for his lavish lifestyle and to buy the continued favor of the powerful Egyptian king on the international scene, he imposed heavy taxes on his subjects. This tax burden was shouldered primarily by the poor and working classes. That's because the nobles, the people with all the power and money, through various legal loopholes and special favors for the king were largely exempt. So the whole system of government was corrupt, as was the judicial system. For the right price you could buy any verdict or judgment you wanted. And the people with the money took advantage of the system to oppress and control the vast majority of people who did not. And since they also had law enforcement in their pocket, they backed up their authority with brute force and threat of violence. Anyone who dared to speak out against all the corruption, or who complained about the injustice or their ill treatment was likely to be beaten without mercy, imprisoned on trumped up charges, or, just as likely, simply killed.

And unfortunately, the church, the one institution that should have been speaking out against all this abuse of power, was no help. In fact, some of the worst perpetrators of these crimes were high ranking priests and religious authorities; after all, they were some of the richest people around. And they made themselves even richer by turning the Temple of God into a money-making machine for themselves. To attract the widest array of potential worshippers (that is, clients with money to spend), they opened the gates of the holy precincts to include the erotically sensual worship of all the Canaanite gods and goddesses. So in the courts of the Lord's house you could worship Baal and Ashtoreth, or the sun and moon if that was your thing; or you

could sacrifice your child to Molech, or buy the services of a temple prostitute. Whatever you wanted, it was there. Oh, and for the handful of people who still had faith in the Lord and wanted to offer their sacrifices exclusively to him, you could do that too – but most of the priests would happily suggest that you to see things more inclusively, and encourage you to cover all your bases by taking full advantage of the wide range of services the Temple offered.

Now, we don't know exactly who the prophet Habakkuk was, because he doesn't tell us. However it's been thought that he was likely a low ranking member of the priestly class. If so, we might think of him as a young pastor just out of seminary, brimming over with faith in the One True God and a heavy dose of youthful idealism. He is eager to serve the Lord by faithfully serving his people. But when he gets to his first call and sees how the world really works, his eyes are opened. He sees the Temple defiled. He sees that his higher ups are nothing but a bunch of crooks and hypocrites. He sees all the injustice and oppression that's going on in society – how every major institution is rotten to the core. But mostly he sees how those few who are remaining faithful to the Lord are suffering terribly. Their plight touches him deep in his soul. His heart goes out to them. He feels their pain. And that's fitting because his name means "embrace". It's almost like he's trying to gather the afflicted in his arms and protect them from the evils that are threatening to devour them.

And it's from this posture that he looks up to the Lord of heaven and pours out his complaint. "I don't get it Lord. Why are you letting this go on? How long do I have to cry out to you before you'll listen? Why aren't you doing anything? How long will you see the violence and injustice that your people are being made to suffer before you'll do something to save them?" One thing we can say for sure about Habakkuk is that he was persistent in his prayer. Most of us give up all too easily in those times when things are bad and God seems to be silent. When we don't get an immediate response, we assume that the Lord doesn't care, or that he won't do anything, or that maybe he's not even there at all. Not Habakkuk. He says to the Lord, "I know you're up there, and I know that you can hear me. And I'm going to stand here like a watchman on guard duty until you give me an answer."

And the Lord who rewards faithfulness in his people did answer Habakkuk. His initial response is recorded in the latter part of the first chapter of the prophet's writings which we did not read this morning. But if you'll allow me to summarize, what the Lord says there is this: "Relax, Habakkuk; I've got it all under control. You'll be happy to know that I am even now in the process of delivering my faithful people and bringing those responsible for their misery into judgment. And let me tell you how I'm going to do it, because it'll blow your socks off when you hear" [yes, that's a bit of a paraphrase]. The Lord tells Habakkuk, "You could never have imagined it, not even in your wildest dreams, but I'm going to bring the much feared and hated armies of Babylon against your nation. *They* will be my instruments to rescue my people and punish the wicked."

Hearing this answer caused Habakkuk's lower jaw to hit the floor. From his perspective, it was like he was complaining about flies in his house and the Lord's response was to tell him that he was going to send over a platoon of infantry armed with a flamethrower and a crate of hand grenades to deal with the problem. However wicked the people making life miserable for God's faithful were, the Babylonians were ten times worse. They were merciless in their conquests, and they ruled the nations they subjugated with terror tactics. They would routinely order mass executions; making examples of those they killed by torturing them to death slowly. And on top of it all, of course, the Babylonians were idol worshipping, Gentile, pagans. At least the present leaders and nobles of Judah, the ones afflicting the people, were of God's chosen race. At least they paid lip service to the Lord. At the public religious festivals and what not at least they outwardly claimed to acknowledge and worship him.

It didn't make any sense to Habakkuk. How could the holy, perfect, and righteous God fight evil among his own people by the hands of people who were in every way even more evil? Evil with a capital E, if you will. And how would that make things any better for the oppressed? I mean, if things are bad for them now, then how much worse will conditions be for them under the Babylonians? Armed with these new questions, Habakkuk went back to his guard post of prayer to inquire of the Lord again. "Thanks for finally giving me an answer; but I don't like what said. Can you explain this to me? How is it that you who are holy, you for whom the tiniest sin is an outrage, how can you use that which is evil to accomplish your good and perfect will?"

We heard the Lord's answer to Habakkuk, and what he says is essentially this: "Write this down, and use big letters so that everyone can see. I want this message to be spread around. My plan of salvation for my faithful people is unfolding exactly according to my timetable. It's moving forward as it should and it will certainly be fulfilled precisely as I have ordained. You can count on it. Even though it seems to you like I'm slow in doing what I have promised, hang in there. It will surely come. It won't be put off indefinitely."

And then he concludes with what are some sharp words of rebuke for the prophet: "Look at you, your soul is puffed up with pride and it's all bent and twisted inside you; but the righteous will live by his faith." What he's saying is this: *You act as if you think you know it all, that you can see the big picture. You see people suffering from injustice and the sins of others and then have the audacity to accuse me of falling down on my job. And then when I tell you how I'm going to fix things, you think you can tell me that the way I'm going to do it is all wrong. Well, let me remind you of a few of the basics: I am the Lord, not you. And I really do know what's going on. You don't; you only think you do. I also know what is best for each and every person living on the face of the earth, and that's precisely what I give them. And all things ultimately serve my good and holy will, yes, even the sins of the wicked. To those who need hardship and suffering in their lives to keep them faithful, I give hardship. To those who are in sin and unbelief, I provide opportunities for them to repent and turn to me – which necessarily means that I don't instantaneously destroy them every time they do something wrong. I know what I'm doing; and even though you seem to think so, I'm not making any mistakes. You can be sure of this: all my faithful will be saved, and every sin will be punished. In the end you will see. Both my love and my justice will prevail. Your part in all this is to trust me. Indeed, your trust in me and my loving care despite what you see and experience is how I count you righteous in my sight. You are righteous when you put your faith in me.*

The Lord didn't need Habakkuk to tell him how to do his job. And what he did in the end was truly remarkable. He brought in the Babylonians just as he said he would. They overthrew the wicked rulers of Judah and punished them severely. They also took away the ill-gotten riches of the wealthy. Meanwhile, most of God's faithful people were deported to Babylon where they were placed in resettlement camps. Life for them there was far from luxurious, but at least the Babylonians maintained proper law and order. For them it was simply good business to treat honest people who obeyed their laws fairly. So, strange as it may seem, the formerly oppressed faithful fared better under the evil Babylonians than they did under the ones who called themselves God's people. Not many years later, the faithless Jews who remained in Judah rebelled against their Babylonian masters. And when they did, the Lord fulfilled his judgments against them by having the Babylonians destroy them completely. For the several decades that followed the only faithful Jews in the world were the ones safely tucked away in those resettlement camps in Babylon. Then, when the timing was right, the Lord raised up another power, the Persians, to punish the Babylonians for their crimes. After the empire of Babylon fell, the Persian king let the deported Jews return home to rebuild their country. And through it all, the Lord was using faithless and evil people to carry out his will and preserve the people who trusted in him.

And that should not surprise us because we know the rest of the story. All of this we've looked at so far today is only a foreshadowing of the much greater deliverance that was yet to come, when the Lord would use evil rulers and corrupt religious leaders to carry out the greatest injustice in all of human history. They condemned and killed Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was the only truly innocent person who ever lived. There has never been nor will there ever be a worse crime – and yet what men meant for evil, God meant for good; for through the innocent suffering and death of his Son, the Lord God brought salvation to sinners who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus. There, on the cross, God saw to it that every sin ever committed was punished in his Son so that those who put their trust in him will be saved. In him both God's love and his justice prevail. And in him we live before God righteous by faith.

And believing this, as we do, changes the way we look at all the evil in the world around us. Not that we suddenly perceive it as good because through it the Lord accomplishes his will; no, evil is still evil. It's bad. It's rather that we, when confronted by evil, don't use it as an occasion to accuse the Lord of falling down on his job, or of not caring for his people, or of not being just. Instead, we should see it as a call to greater faith in Jesus – to trust in him even though we cannot see or imagine what good the Lord is accomplishing by it. We should see it also as an opportunity for us to show the love and compassion of our Savior for the victims. And finally, remembering the prayer of our Lord to forgive them because they do not know what they're doing, we should see the evil we suffer at the hands of others as opportunities to extend to them the same

forgiveness that we have received in Jesus. May God our Father use every means at his disposal to work in us such a complete and holy faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!