

I.N.I.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2010
Hab. 1:12-2:4

In Christ Jesus, the Rock upon which we place our trust and confidence, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The oil is still gushing out. After 80 some days of frustration the gaping hole is still not plugged. When the leak first began the environmental agency was reluctant to use some chemicals to absorb the oil because they said the chemicals may adversely affect the wildlife even worse than the oil. Well now after hundreds of millions of gallons of oil in the Gulf and 80 days later the wildlife has been terribly affected and it seems BP is still no closer to plugging the hole. The impact of massive chemicals would probably now not have been any worse than the massive oil spill. But sometimes there is a danger of fighting an evil by using something that can become an evil of even greater proportions.

The people of Judah faced such a situation. They went through a "from the frying pan into the fire" kind of experience. Their lot went from bad to worse.

The book of Habakkuk consists of several complaints by the prophet and God's answers to those complaints. It concludes with a psalm of trust. In the first complaint the prophet spoke to God about the evil conditions in the land. Political rulers, leaders in society, and powerful men in the kingdom subjected the people to oppression, violence, injustice, exorbitant taxes and other abuses. When Habakkuk asked God to intervene God said He would. He said He would send the wicked Babylonians as avengers.

Which meant what? It meant that now the people would be under similar conditions only under the military power of another nation. It would be like God answering our prayers for relief from immoral, godless, cruel American leaders by sending immoral, godless, cruel Iraqi leaders to conquer us and destroy our bad leaders. Would we be any better off? It seemed to Habakkuk that the spiritual chemicals--the Babylonians used to eradicate the evil of the original oil spill--the bad leaders of Judah--was worse than the bad leaders.

Since we lack the understanding and insight of God, since God's ways are as Isaiah says "far above our ways" and "His thoughts above our thoughts"---so often we humans end up questioning and doubting, wondering and complaining. The book of Habakkuk is a perfect example of how man wonders what God is doing in heaven; wonders if He really is watching and listening; if He really is in control, cares and is concerned.

The prophet Habakkuk lived some 50-75 years after the prophet Nahum, whom we studied last Sunday. The things Nahum had predicted had come to pass. The powerful Assyrian empire with its fortified capital, Nineveh, was destroyed. But the conquering armies of the Babylonians were not content to stop there. They continued to sweep across the face of the earth; destroying one nation after another till they came to Judah and were ready to pounce on them.

Habakkuk lived just prior to the destruction of Judah. The formerly faithful nation had now sunk to its lowest depths. After a brief restoration and reformation brought about by King Josiah, the people once again fell into idolatry and immorality---corruption and violence, injustice and strife was rampant. And Habakkuk just can't understand it. In the first 4 verses of his book Habakkuk complains to God...**O LORD, HOW LONG SHALL I CRY, AND YOU WILL NOT HEAR? EVEN CRY OUT TO YOU, "VIOLENCE!" AND YOU WILL NOT SAVE. WHY DO YOU SHOW ME INIQUITY, AND CAUSE ME TO SEE TROUBLE? FOR PLUNDERING AND VIOLENCE ARE**

BEFORE ME; THERE IS STRIFE, AND CONTENTION ARISES. THEREFORE THE LAW IS POWERLESS, AND JUSTICE NEVER GOES FORTH. FOR THE WICKED SURROUND THE RIGHTEOUS; THEREFORE PERVERSE JUDGMENT PROCEEDS.

In other words **WHY DON'T YOU DO SOMETHING, GOD?** And to Habakkuk's amazement and astonishment the LORD responds...**I AM GOING TO DO SOMETHING IN YOUR DAY...**

LOOK AMONG THE NATIONS AND WATCH -- BE UTTERLY ASTOUNDED! FOR I WILL WORK A WORK IN YOUR DAYS WHICH YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE, THOUGH IT WERE TOLD YOU. FOR INDEED I AM RAISING UP THE CHALDEANS, A BITTER AND HASTY NATION WHICH MARCHES THROUGH THE BREADTH OF THE EARTH, TO POSSESS DWELLING PLACES THAT ARE NOT THEIRS. THEY ARE TERRIBLE AND DREADFUL; THEIR JUDGMENT AND THEIR DIGNITY PROCEED FROM THEMSELVES. THEIR HORSES ALSO ARE SWIFTER THAN LEOPARDS, AND MORE FIERCE THAN EVENING WOLVES. THEIR CHARGERS CHARGE AHEAD; THEIR CAVALRY COMES FROM AFAR; THEY FLY AS THE EAGLE THAT HASTENS TO EAT. "THEY ALL COME FOR VIOLENCE; THEIR FACES ARE SET LIKE THE EAST WIND. THEY GATHER CAPTIVES LIKE SAND. THEY SCOFF AT KINGS, AND PRINCES ARE SCORNFUL BY THEM. THEY DERIDE EVERY STRONGHOLD, FOR THEY HEAP UP EARTHEN MOUNDS AND SEIZE IT. THEN HIS MIND CHANGES, AND HE TRANSGRESSES; HE COMMITS OFFENSE, ASCRIBING THIS POWER TO HIS GOD."

This was not at all what Habakkuk had in mind. So often we ask God for justice! We wonder why the unbeliever who scoffs at God; the heretic who lives his life in total disregard of God's Word and Sacraments seems to be so popular among so many people, or flourishes financially and amasses great wealth. How often doesn't the question cross the lips of believers, **WHY DOES GOD ALLOW THE WICKED TO PROSPER** while we so often look upon our lives as insufficient or lacking?--or we ask **WHY DOES GOD PERMIT THIS OR THAT TO HAPPEN TO ME? HOW LONG WILL IT BE BEFORE HE INTERCEDES ON MY BEHALF?**

Habakkuk just couldn't understand how a holy God could allow such wickedness to run rampant. And then when God declared that He would do something about the situation and let the wicked, cruel, dreaded, lawless Babylonians come and destroy Judah because of her unfaithfulness, Habakkuk was even more perplexed. Nothing made sense. God would use an even more corrupt, wicked, immoral heathen nation to destroy His people who had fallen into unbelief. **WHY?**

No doubt Habakkuk's mind raced with thoughts and passages. What would happen to the promise of the Messiah if all of Judah were destroyed? All of God's blessed promises of salvation and eternal life for His people would come to an end. That couldn't be! The Babylonians were not known for their kindness or sympathy, on the contrary they were known for their cruelty and savagery. Remember last week's message. We heard how Nineveh was totally annihilated so much so that it wasn't until 1845, some 2,400 years later that the cities ruins were found.

Habakkuk cries out **WE SHALL NOT DIE?** Literally the Hebrew reads, **WE WILL NOT DIE WILL WE?** He is full of questions. How can Your eyes that are too pure to look upon evil tolerate this treacherous wrong? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? Habakkuk is here speaking of the remnant in Judah; the few remaining faithful left, like himself who still followed Jehovah's Word and still longed for the Messiah. Habakkuk is searching for answers?

Habakkuk draws for us a very vivid description of what he envisions the destruction by the Babylonians to be like. They, the people of Judah, are like fish, with no leader, helplessly swimming in

the sea, ready to be snatched up and caught. Their enemy pulls them up with hooks, catches them in his casting net and gathers them in his dragnet. He then sacrifices and burns incense to his net and dragnet. This not only signified that the Babylonians worshipped their own strength as their god and took pride in their military might and weaponry; but the 4 main gods of the Babylonians were pictured holding nets or dragging nets in which their captured enemies squirm and cry out for help.

Habakkuk ends his questions by asking, **SHALL THEY (THE BABYLONIANS) KEEP ON EMPTYING THEIR NETS, DESTROYING, SLAYING NATIONS WITHOUT PITY?** In other words **GOD, CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHY DON'T YOU DO SOMETHING? THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT!**

God again answers Habakkuk's complaint. But He does not explain the reason why He will allow this. Yet He does sufficiently answer Habakkuk's question. We read in verses 2-4: **THEN THE LORD ANSWERED ME AND SAID: "WRITE THE VISION AND MAKE IT PLAIN ON TABLETS, THAT HE MAY RUN WHO READS IT. FOR THE VISION IS YET FOR AN APPOINTED TIME; BUT AT THE END IT WILL SPEAK, AND IT WILL NOT LIE. THOUGH IT TARRIES, WAIT FOR IT; BECAUSE IT WILL SURELY COME, IT WILL NOT TARRY. BEHOLD THE PROUD, HIS SOUL IS NOT UPRIGHT IN HIM; BUT THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY HIS FAITH.**

This message and vision was to be written down in large letters, plainly, legibly for all to see. So that even one hurrying by on his way to work, or school, or business, or worship will be able to read it quickly. In other words the Lord is directing Habakkuk to erect billboards throughout Judah displaying this message from the LORD. These words also may be taken to mean that the one who hears the message should write it down and run with it and tell others about it. However you take these words the meaning is clear. **GET THE MESSAGE OUT. TELL ONE AND ALL!**

And what is the message to be written on the tablets. It is the heart and core of the Gospel message of salvation. The wicked, unbelieving, proud in heart will not live, they will be dealt with, their time will come; **BUT THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY HIS FAITH!**

The Apostle Paul quotes this verse twice--once in his letter to the Romans---Cha. 1:17 and again in his letter to the Galatians---Cha. 3:11. This passage is again quoted in Hebrews 10:38. But who are the **JUST** and what is their **FAITH?**

The just, the righteous are all those who have been declared to be **NOT GUILTY, INNOCENT** of all sins through Jesus suffering, death and resurrection. There is no one just by him or herself, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Everyone of us here and every person is conceived and born spiritually dead in sins and unable to meet God's righteous decree of perfect love in thought, word and deed. Righteousness must come from outside of us, not within us. And that is what this message is saying.

Believing, trusting having faith in this message of righteousness in Christ, this message of forgiveness of sins and salvation through Jesus, not by works, but from God's grace is what gives us **LIFE!**

Paul repeatedly refers to this truth to prove that we are just in God's sight and obtain life and salvation not by our own works, not by our church attendance, prayers, offerings or anything we can or have or ever will do, but solely by faith. It was this passage in Romans 1:17 over which Martin Luther pondered and which by the work of the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to see the worthlessness of his attempts at self-justification as he was taught by the Roman Catholic Church of his day. It was not by his fasting, praying, or entering the monastery and giving up his earthly goods that he could stand righteous in God's eyes. It can be and is only through faith in what Jesus had done for him---Jesus' perfect life and Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross.

So God answers Habakkuk, "Never mind how I control or rule this world, just know that I am in control." In other words **BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD** as He tells us in Ps. 46. There is a time appointed for all of the unbelieving, boastful, proud scoffers; but for you, simply believe in My promises of salvation and you shall live.

In this little verse of simple Hebrew words is found the very essence of Christianity. Man is saved through faith alone, not faith in himself, but faith alone in Jesus' perfect life of obedient love and in His sacrificial death upon the cross and His resurrection to everlasting life.

May God's answer to Habakkuk be the very words of courage and comfort we cling to when we too undergo trials and tribulations, when we are tempted to doubt and question God's handling of our lives or of the world's situation. When we think that **WE NEED** to mind God's business, let us remember that to live by faith means to so trust God to mind His business fully knowing that then all will be well.

When we seem to see the injustice of the world all around us, when we struggle just to make ends meet while unbelievers flourish, when we are terror stricken by our own sins, when sickness, illness and death touches our lives and we wonder **WHY?**--May we remember the **ROCK** to which we cling, the **ROCK** upon which we base our faith, **JESUS CHRIST** and the Promise of His Forgiving Love.

God says to Habakkuk and us, "Be assured I am in control. I have My reasons for allowing things to happen the way they do." Instead of wondering, questioning and doubting may we be led by the Spirit to firmly trust. We cannot build faith on doubt or lack of understanding but our faith can be built only upon God's sure Word of promise.

Amen.