

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN END TIME – LAST JUDGMENT

The Answer to the Horrors I've Seen

Habakkuk 1:1-3; 2:1-4 (NIV84)

¹ The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received. ² How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? ³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. ¹ I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. ² Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. ³ For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. ⁴ "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright— but the righteous will live by his faith—

There are a lot of military folk tied to our congregation – veterans and civilians. I'm very thankful for those who come and continue to come. But there are people you know, veterans and the like, who have sworn off church. Because of the horrors, the violence, the suffering, the pain, that they have seen, they've concluded that there cannot be a good God who is in control of everything. If there was, he wouldn't allow all that I've seen.

I think those veterans would relate with the prophet Habakkuk. "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds." (chapter 1 verses 2-3)

Images of the holocaust. Napalm and agent orange from Vietnam. Missile strikes on Middle Eastern targets. The airplanes striking the twin towers on 9/11. Violence. Hatred. Wrong. Injustice. Veteran or not, this is the world that we see. It's evil! It leaves scars, moreso for the veteran who has had to personally participate or witness moments like these. Why, God? Why do you allow such horrors? Why do you make us live through these things and carry this trauma through our lives?

God doesn't tell us to keep our complaints about evil, violence, and injustice to ourselves. Where many give up on God after witnessing such evil in our world is that they ask the question, "Why, God?" but don't look for the answer where he gives it. Habakkuk demanded answer and waited for the Lord to give it: "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint." (chapter 2 verse 1) And God answered.

I think it's a fair warning at this point to tell you that the answer is one that you will most likely wrestle with. Why? Because of we first have to take a look at who we are. In a world of picking sides - of good guys and bad guys, cops and robbers, Jedi and Sith - we put ourselves on the side of good. Then we look out into this world, and we see the bad guys. Multiple military conflicts are being waged right now. People are killing others for land, food, resources as this sermon is being preached. People are being abducted, sold into slavery. People are using their positions of power to abuse others. There are a lot of bad people doing bad things out there.

But what about in here? How good are we, really? To get a better insight of who we are, think about what our first inclination almost reflexively is when someone does something bad to us. When someone says something mean to you, you want to right away throw words back at them that will wound them how they have wounded you. If someone punches you, you immediately want that person to pay for what they've done, maybe hit them back instantly without even thinking. It's true for children, even babies. Do you have to teach them to be good or to be bad? They already know how to be selfish, how to throw tantrums when they don't get their way. They already know to hit someone if they don't like what the other person is doing. They already know to take a toy or a cookie when someone isn't looking so that they can have it all to themselves. So often we are not the good guys, but behave like the bad guys. This is humanity. We are the source of violence, wrongs, injustice, conflict.

So, it shouldn't be surprising when God says things like this, that after the flood when there were only 8 believers left in the world (Noah and his family), God said that "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood." (Genesis 8:21) King David, a man after the Lord's heart, confessed that surely he was sinful from birth, sinful from the time his mother conceived him. (Psalm 51:5) The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Roman Christians says that the sinful mind, this nature we have since the beginning of our lives, is hostile to God, that it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so, nor does it want to. (Romans 8:7) Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, calls himself the worst of sinners.

Are we the bad guys, then? We are not, only because of how God answers the problem of the evil and horrors and the violence of this world.

God launched an independent operation to save the world. He came down from heaven of his own free will to take our place. His inclination was never to hurt or harm those who hurt or harmed him. He never retaliated, never added to the violence and the wrongs of this world. This was exemplified on the cross when people unjustly sentenced him to capital punishment without him having committed a single crime, who cruelly pounded the nails through his hands and feet to the cross, insulting him for him claiming to be who he actually is and he responded with mercy and compassion as he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

God doesn't leave the horrible things that people have done unpunished. On the cross, Jesus took on every ounce of injustice that you have ever witnessed, every penalty for every act of violence committed by us, every debt owed by our wrongdoing, everything that we have ever destroyed, every instance of strife that we have caused, every conflict that we have participated in, encouraged, failed to stop. He took on himself the evil every person has ever done – including yours and mine. He became our sin as he suffered for every single instance of wrong. He did this to clear our names of all charges, to turn us from being the bad guys who should be punished and cast into hell and instead delivered us, saved us, made us right with God, made us good guys.

Yet, even with God making us the good guys by paying for the horrors and atrocities we've committed, there's still a lot of bad guys out there. What is God going to do about them? As he told Habakkuk, the horrible people who commit violence and wrong will be judged, but not yet. He's giving them time.

But Why, God? Why make us wait? (And we are used to instant gratification.) One reason why God has us wait for evil to be taken out of the world is because he gave you and me time even when we were the bad guys. He gave us time to learn that he himself had paid the price for the horrors and the violence and the wrong and the conflicts that we have inflicted on other people. He gave us time to change us from being bad guys to good guys, ones whose records are expunged from all evil acts because Christ paid the price. Will we allow God time to make other bad guys good, like us?

Another reason why God waits to take all the bad guys out of the world is found in our Gospel reading of the parable of the weeds and the wheat. The weeds were sown by an enemy, the devil. These are the bad things in this world - horrible people doing horrible things that we never want to see, never want to mention, acts that give us trauma. Yet God did not immediately have the weeds pulled up even as the just cry went out to take the evil out. Instead, God lets them good guys and bad guys coexist. Why? "Because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them." (Matthew 13:29)

The all-knowing, all-powerful, all-just God knows that by removing all the weeds, all the wicked unbelievers in this world, all the sons of the devil who commit violence and wrong and destruction in this world, right now, it may uproot, damage, kill the good seed, the believers, those who have been made the good guys by what God has done for them. God will not do anything or allow anything that will destroy the faith of his believers. God allows bad people to coexist with the good so that none of the good are ever lost.

This is why God's answer to Habakkuk in the face of all the horrors that he has witnessed is that "the righteous will live by his faith." (chapter 2 verse 4) In his infinite wisdom, God sees the whole picture. Because of the fact that we were once the bad guys and were changed by God to be good, we humbly admit that we only see a small sliver of the whole picture. We're not God. We haven't always been good. We don't know what ramifications our actions or the actions of others will be. To live this way, trusting God that he knows what he is doing, that the horrors that I've witnessed are allowed so as to not lose any of the ones he will make good, this is hard. This is why we live by faith, not by sight. We trust God on who he is and what he has done with violence by Jesus taking it all on to himself. Everything in our lives, everything we see in this world has to be viewed through the lens of the cross, of how God took on and personally paid the price for our evil, to make bad guys like us good, and to justly judge all evildoers in the end.

Why does God allow all this violence and wickedness in the world? We get to ask him that, wrestle with that, just as Habakkuk did. He doesn't turn us away but answers us. His answer is that he will punish every single atrocity in exactly the right timing. But he will also take time so that he can make bad guys good, just like you and me, so that none of those he has made good will ever be lost because of the evils of the world.

In the end, evil is punished on Jesus. Those who continue in their evil, God will absolutely bring justice to them. Every wrong, every act of violence and destruction, every conflict will be accounted for and paid in full. It is in faith that God will do all these things at the right time that we live. He is the answer to the horrors we have witnessed. Amen.