

Title: Waiting In Faith
Text: Habakkuk 3:16-19
Date: February 15, 2009
Immanuel Baptist Church
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Our text today is part of an ancient hymn or psalm. The beginning of chapter 3 reads: “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On *shigionoth*.” We don’t know what that last word means, but most think it was some kind of musical term. The last line of chapter 3 reads: “For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.” Our text was very possibly part of a song intended to be sung in worship. It is a song of faith.

Heather Whitestone was the Miss America who had the disability of deafness. Do you know what she did for her talent competition? She danced. I read that in her preparation she placed a special hearing machine to her ear, played it very loud, and memorized the music—every beat. When the time came for her to dance the ballet, she moved precisely and beautifully to the rhythm of the music she couldn’t hear. But she had heard it before, and she remembered.

I wonder how many of us are capable of dancing to the song of faith without hearing the music? Sooner or later we all face life without the music. It is not true that if you love God and are faithful to God you will always hear the music. Life with God is not all sun and summertime. There are cold, dark days in wintry places.

I heard about a man who was traveling on a dinner flight and found an enormous roach on top of his salad. Back home he wrote a harsh letter to the president of the airline. A few days later he received a letter from the president explaining how that particular airplane had been fumigated and all the seats and upholstery stripped. There was even the suggestion that the aircraft would be taken out of service. The man was very impressed until he noticed that quite by accident the letter he had written had stuck to the back of the president’s letter. On his letter there was a note, “Reply with the regular roach letter.”

Too often we offer standard, generic responses to people who are suffering and questioning God. This offers little comfort. In fact, when we respond with pat, shallow answers we may drive those suffering into deeper confusion and despair.

Life is filled with adversity. Medical science has made it possible for us to enjoy a certain quality of life longer than any prior generation, if we take reasonably descent care of ourselves, but it cannot wipe away the inevitable demise of the human body and the suffering it causes. Who today goes through life without relational stress—in the family, at the workplace, in the organizations we are a part of. Whether it is grieving at the graveside

of a loved one or dealing with the breakup of a marriage or coming face to face with our fears and failures we all at some point must face life without the music.

What do we do in those times when there is no music? When things don't go as expected, when our plans get thwarted, when our questions and our prayers go unanswered, when circumstances entrap us in walls of disappointment and disillusion? Do we give up on faith and say it was all a mistake, all an illusion, that we were just kidding ourselves to think that we ever heard the music at all? Do we try bargaining with God? Do we make desperate promises that we will never keep?

Habakkuk complains and questions. The Babylonians are coming. They are a ruthless and violent people; a law unto themselves. They worship might and power, they promote their own honor, and they are a people to be feared and dreaded, says the prophet. They will sweep down and set their hooks and nets into the land and gather the people in like a fisherman would gather in his catch, to be used for their advantage, disposed of or enslaved at will. The prophet says to God, "We cry for help but you do not listen. We cry out for deliverance but you do not save. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted" (1:2-4).

But Habakkuk remains faithful. It is Habakkuk who gives us that great line that is quoted by Paul in his letter to the Romans, "the righteous or just will live by faith" (2:4). The righteous or just are not persons who are perfect or faultless, nor are they persons without questions, doubts, and complaints. The prophet carries on a lover's quarrel with God, complaining to God about perceived inconsistencies and injustices.

In the Old Testament the people of Israel often interpreted plagues and invasions from other nations as evidence of God's judgment for their sin. Habakkuk undoubtedly shared that theological perspective to some degree. How could God use a wicked nation like Babylon to punish Israel? I'm sure that if I shared that theological presupposition, which I don't, but if I did, I would be questioning and complaining too. And yet, no theology adequately explains human suffering, especially immense human suffering. No theology is fully adequate.

The righteous or just are not those who are sinless, or who never question or cry out in anger, or who never feel lonely or abandoned, or who never argue or complain to God. The righteous are those who keep covenant with God, that is, they are committed to loving God and loving neighbor.

Biblical and theological scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that "righteousness" is "an ethical term used to mark people who live generatively in the community in order to sustain and enhance the community's well-being. The 'righteous person' is

characteristically one who invests in the community, showing special attentiveness to the poor and the needy.”

The righteous person is one who is committed to a relationship with God that is expressed in a commitment to the good of the human community. Faith for Habakkuk is not a matter of believing in God, that was a given. Rather, faith is a matter of trusting God and keeping covenant with God. Faith is a matter of doing one’s part to fulfill one’s responsibilities of good will toward the community. Faith is about standing up for what is right and good and just; it’s about loving and caring and pursuing the good of all people, especially the marginalized. Faith means being faithful to the covenant even when life gets difficult and our questions go unanswered and we have to live with inconsistencies and contradictions. Faith is being faithful to God when God seems silent, when we cannot hear the music. Those who reduce faith to believing the right doctrines distort biblical faith. No one gets all their beliefs right anyway, and to presume that one can is foolish and arrogant.

So how do we do that? How do we remain faithful to God when we can’t hear the music? We remember. Habakkuk was part of a faith tradition that rehearsed God’s mighty works and he remained in awe of those works. He prays: “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy” (3:2). His cry for help is based on an inherited tradition of God’s salvation.

In Luke’s version of the Lord’s Supper when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, he said, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” We remember the love of God poured out for us in the life and death of Jesus, our Lord. Paul said in his letter to the Romans that God demonstrates God’s love for us in this: While we were still sinners (and Paul uses other words in that passage to describe our condition: when we were “powerless”—to effect our own change; when we were “ungodly”—living without respect or regard for God; when we were “enemies” of God—living in outright rebellion), Christ died for us. Christ gave his life for the good of those who are not good.

As followers of Christ we can’t explain human suffering, but we believe that in Christ God shares our suffering, that God, in the Spirit of the living Christ comes to our side, and is with us. God with us and God for us are at the heart of the theology of the cross.

When we share in the Lord’s Table, in Holy Communion, or for that matter, when we come to worship or pray and sing hymns of the faith, we may not feel worthy. We may not feel particularly close to God or very loving or excited about being here. None of that matters. When we start basing our spiritual life on feelings we are headed down the wrong path. I get the impression that in many worship services these days the goal is to manufacture spiritual ecstasy. Many Christians go to worship to get a feel good dose of

Christianity, but it does not translate into a life of love and compassion and hope. Faith has nothing to do with feeling good or feeling bad.

There may be time when we may not be able to see beyond our own disappointment or hear beyond the cries of our own pain, but when we come together as a faith community and remember what God has done for us and celebrate how much God loves us no matter how or what we feel, we find the strength and courage and compassion and hope to be faithful.

It's all about keeping the covenant. Jesus, in the Gospels, interprets his death as the sign and seal of God's new covenant with his people. So whether the music plays or is silent, we keep the covenant and we wait for God to act.

Waiting reminds us of our humanity; that there are so many things beyond our control. You put gas in your car and walk in to pay. There is one check out line; it is long, and the girl behind the counter is new and the scanner is not functioning properly. What do you do? You wait. The problem is that most of us wait in frustration and bitterness instead of waiting in faith. To wait in faith is to be faithful to the covenant—to love our neighbor. That means that we refuse to give the girl behind the counter a hard time, making her life more difficult; rather, we pray for her and speak to her with kind words.

Waiting, of course, is never easy. I remember watching the comedy show "Hee Haw" with my grandmother when I was a child and one of the comedy pieces I remember is where Doc Campbell is treating a patient who says something like, "What do I do Doc, I broke my arm in two places?" And the Doc says, "Well, the best thing for you to do is stay out of them places." Habakkuk is in a place he cannot get out of. And that may be true for many of us. After his vision of things to come he says, "I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us" (3:16b). The prophet is voicing his expectation of God's vindication, but it's not going to be soon. He and his people will suffer much from the nation invading them before fortunes are reversed. We all find ourselves from time to time in places of brokenness and suffering and the only way out of it is through it.

But Habakkuk has hope, he looks beyond the day of calamity to the day when God will make all things right, when God will redeem not only Israel but the whole world: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14). But in the meantime, all he can do is wait and be faithful to the covenant.

Do we share the prophet's vision? Or even better, do we share Jesus' vision of a world made right, a world of peace sustained by compassion and restorative justice? Do we believe that something better is coming? Can we say with Paul that our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all? Can

we wait in faith even if it gets worse before it gets better? Spiritual director and retreat leader Margaret Guenther says, “To wait upon God is not a fruitless waste of time or a sign of inefficient, ineffective prayer: it is our God-given work, our assigned task.”

There are many who have shared Habakkuk’s faith and have learned to dance the dance of faith without the music. Dietrich Bonhoeffer remained faithful to the covenant from a German prison cell awaiting execution. Others in hospital rooms, in funeral homes, in refugee camps, in war zones, and in the destructive paths of floods and hurricanes have learn to wait in faith.

What about us today? Can we affirm the prophet’s faith? Can we sing his song of faith at the graveside of a loved one, in the aftermath of a tragedy, in the grip of a debilitating illness, or in the ruins of a financial collapse? The prophet sings . . . Do we believe that?

Gracious God, help us to trust you in the midst of the heartaches and heartbreaks of life, to keep covenant with you, to be faithful to love you and love our neighbor even though we may not feel like it. We are thankful that you are able to absorb all our anger and frustration, that you are not offended by our questions and complaints, and that your grace is available to all of us in all the circumstances of life.

We rejoice that in Christ you are both with us and for us, and that you will always hold us close and never let us go. Amen.