

Psalm 73 Habakkuk 1:12-2:4, 14 Galatians 3:16-22 St. Luke 10:23-37

Is God always right?

Has there ever been a time in your life when you wondered whether God knew what He was doing? Have you ever faced a situation when the thought crossed your mind that God could be handling this a lot better than He was? Or perhaps you may have thought that He didn't quite measure up to your mental image of what He ought to be?

Habakkuk is one of my all time favorite books in the Old Testament. One of my projects at the Church of England Seminary in South Africa was to translate and comment on this rather short book. What I really enjoyed about this project was that I had to deal with the raw pain and anguish of the prophet in the original Hebrew...without the generally sanitized version of our English translations. And there before my eyes the prophet's heart lay open and his struggle with God explosively exposed.

The book opens with the Prophet crying out to God about the waywardness of His people. "O Lord," the prophet prays, "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." Habakkuk is, of course, referring to the nation of Judah, which had stubbornly resisted the repeated calls for repentance. He had obviously taught them the law – or in our terms we could say he had been preaching for a long time – but no one listened. His words fell on deaf ears and everyone continued to do as they pleased. So, Habakkuk took his complaint to God...and he basically said something like this. "Lord, I am sick and tired of You not listening to me! Hey, I'm trying my best to do the job You told me to do, but the tools You gave me just don't work. I have been preaching and preaching and preaching, but no one listens to

me. And things just seem to be getting worse and worse and I am at my wits end as how to stop the whole nation from going down the tubes. And, quite frankly, You just don't seem to be all that interested...I feel like heaven is made of marble every time I pray." Now of course, You've never spoken to God like this so you might not understand, but the prophet said it as he felt it. He had gone into this prophecy thing thinking that all he had to do was preach the Word and the people would fall neatly in line with what was right. But things were not going the way He thought it ought to have been going and so something had to be wrong...and as God was the author of all this, the fault had to lie with Him. While Habakkuk had been doing his part, God was either asleep or somewhere else. That's the gist of this opening complaint.

But then God took the prophet by surprise. In fact, one might say, God took the wind out of his sails. In verses 5 through 11 of chapter 1 God showed Habakkuk how He was going to deal with His erring people. It was as if God was saying, "You think I'm indifferent, huh? Well, watch Me." Then He went on to reveal that He was going to send the Chaldeans, a rising empire at that time, against Judah in war. Now, you need to bear in mind that the Chaldeans were known for their fierce cruelty in battle. The only modern parallel that I can think of that might have the same effect on us as it did on the prophet Habakkuk would be if God was to tell us that He was raising up the Islamic fundamentalists to flatten us because we were no longer living as a Christian nation. Yes, I know that has been said before by some...and think about how you reacted to such pronouncements. Were you shocked? Perhaps offended or angered? Well, Habakkuk just about went into apoplexy.

In chapter one verse 12 through chapter two verse one, the prophet came close to charging God with capriciousness and with duplicity and hypocrisy. The bottom line accusation here is that God was, according to Habakkuk, guilty of overkill...the

punishment did not fit the crime and therefore was not consistent with God's character... yes, Judah was bad, but not as bad as the people God wanted to use to discipline them. Then, after this "telling God off" by reminding Him that what He proposed to do was in violation of His Own character, the prophet was so angry that in verse one of chapter two, he used fighting words to describe his disposition at the time...this is battle terminology! "I will stand my ground and set myself on the battle rampart of the wall of my own opinion (as I know I am right and He is wrong!), and I will watch to see how God will defend Himself and prepare myself to counter attack should he dare argue with me!"

Yes, I am overstating it a bit here, but it is very strong language used in this verse and I want you to feel the full impact of the prophet's indignation...because deep down inside, if you are honest, you may be able to identify with him in one way or another. Even though you may never have said this in so many words, there may have been times in your life when you wondered whether God really was as good as He says He is. You know, we all have our own stack of preconceived ideas about God. And sometimes, things happen that upset our neat little stack...and at these times we either accuse God of duplicity or of indifference or of failure or of impotence or of inconsistency or of cruelty or any number of things that don't fit in with our neat little stack. After all, how can our stack be wrong? We put it all together in the right order, right? And so we too, often find ourselves pouting on the walls of our own ideology waiting for God to come and admit that He was wrong and that He would try to do better next time.

And we are not alone. Asaph, the author of our Psalm for today, had his little stack tipped over after he observed the apparent prosperity of the wicked...until he reexamined his conclusions in the light of God's revealed truth. The Lawyer in our Gospel lesson for today, who stood up to test Jesus, thought he pretty much had God figured out. That is until the parable knocked his neat little stack over. There he learned that the God he

thought he had in a box was more anxious for him to live out what he thought he knew about God than to be able to smugly dot every doctrinal “i” and to cross every theological “t”. That was the same complaint God had against the church in Ephesus, if you remember. In His letter via St. John, Jesus said to them, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. (Sounds very like He could be addressing the Continuing Anglican Movement, don’t you think?) Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent.” You see, it wasn’t that Jesus thought that doctrine and theology wasn’t important...no, He commended them for their spiritual purity. But it had made them hard and proud and arrogant and they had forgotten the love of God...that love that remains pure even while He stoops down into the dirt of our sin-sick souls simply because He loves us. That is the character of the One they professed to follow, but in time they seemed to have lost it in the neat pile of ideological assumptions, no doubt, tied up in neat bundles with oodles of Scripture verses to support their positions...and Jesus rebuked them for it.

But we all tend to do this, dear brethren – we all have our favorite pet texts and verses that we trot out to the exclusion of other not so favorite texts and verses – even satan cited Scripture to back up his false claims when he tempted our Lord in the wilderness... and Jesus had to set him straight by quoting the other side of the equation. And in our Epistle lesson for today, we see that the Galatians also thought they needed to put God in the box of human predictability. Shut Him up in rites and rituals and our lives will be

just fine. Find His favor in personally doing every He said in His law and then some (like a child trying to outdo his siblings by sucking up big time) and then at least you will know how He ought to deal with you. But, as St. Paul pointed out, that was not the purpose of the law...the law was never meant to be a magical formula to force God into compliance and to make life easy. In fact the law was meant to make life more difficult to the point where we would realize that we simply cannot live up to the standard of a holy perfect God...not because there is anything wrong with Him, or anything wrong with His Law, but rather because there is everything wrong with us...and so the Gospel of Jesus teaches us that God loves us anyway- in spite of the fact that we are weak and sinful - and it teaches us that He wants the best for us always...and so He made a way for us come to Him because we could not. That's the one and only true God...a God Who is holy and just and always consistently true to His character...and yet a God Who is at the same time loving and kind and compassionate and benevolent and good and merciful and forgiving...and for this reason, He both set the penalty for sin and paid the penalty for sin. Jesus died on the cross of Calvary because God is both just and loving at the same time.

But back to the book of Habakkuk...as the story unfolds we see that, contrary to the peeved prophet's expectations, God did not come to apologize for not living up to the prophet's perceived idea of His character. In fact, just the opposite happened. In the form of a vision, God showed Habakkuk the bigger picture, if you will...that through all these events, whether perceived as good or bad, the Lord was steadily working towards His goal for the whole earth to be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. In time, Habakkuk would see that what seemed awful to him at the time, was actually part of a much bigger plan for the good of the whole earth, not just the nation of Judah. Through this crucible of suffering, Judah would emerge purged of her dross and purified as silver

in the fire. But also, through them and through their suffering and redemption and restoration, the Person of God would somehow be revealed to those who had never heard of Him. And in the end, Habakkuk had to acknowledge that his view of God had been distorted by his own preconceived ideas...

Now, the same is still true for us today. How many of you have not come through a difficult time of trial only to realize that not only had God not deserted you as you had been tempted to think, but also that during this time He had done a great work in your life and in the lives of those around you? A work that might not have been accomplished had you not gone through those deep waters. So, perhaps today is a good day to take our idea of our God out of our proverbial boxes to see if it measures up to the real Him at all. We may find that He is a little bigger than what we thought He was. Of course that measurement needs to use the very Word of God itself as the measuring rule because it is there that He has chosen to reveal His character, and you will need to do that measurement every day for the rest of your lives because you will never figure Him out to the point of nailing Him down or bundling Him up in a tight package.

But for right now, why not take your idea of God out of your little box and line that image up against what we see here about Him in the Eucharist. Jesus told us that as often as we did this, we ought to do it in remembrance of Him. In other words, the Eucharist tells us something about Him...it tells us something about His character. For instance, here at His Table we are told that our Father wants us to be with Him...He wants us to come into His Presence so that we might enjoy each other's company. But here He also tells us that He wants us to be with Him so badly that He was willing to do what He knew we couldn't do in order to make that union possible. So, here we see the Father heart of God...here we see the love of God for each and every single one of us. Now, as you fiddle with your flawed image of God buried somewhere in your heart and mind,

remember what made it what it is today. Remember those times that you thought He was not all that interested in you, those times when you thought He really didn't like you all that much, those times when you thought He had forgotten all about you, those times when you thought He really could've done better...those are the events that have largely shaped your image of Him. But does your image of God fit the image revealed in the Eucharist? Does your image fit the image of a God Who loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice Himself for us? If not, why not lay it down at His feet as you come to His Table this morning and ask Him to help you see the bigger picture, so that, like Habakkuk who clearly had to discard his faulty view of God, you too may trust Him even when times are rough, simply because you know Him to be Who He is.

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