

“Living by Faith”

The Little Book of HABAKKUK

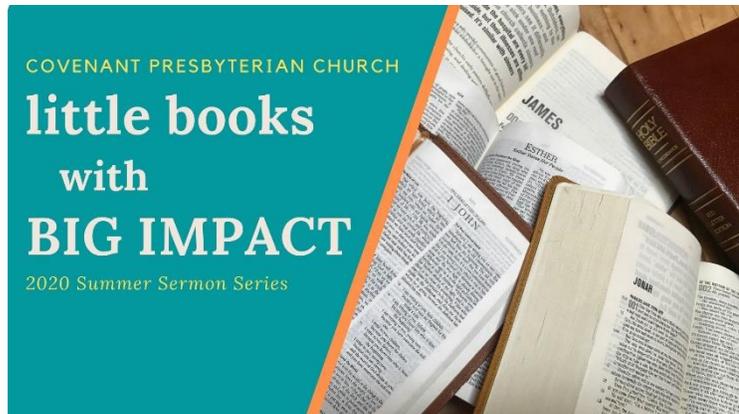
Habakkuk 2:2-4

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Our “little books” series continues with Habakkuk, and I would bet a nickel that at least a few people in worship today didn’t even know that Habakkuk is the name of the book of a Bible. So if you never heard of Habakkuk before right now, you’re not alone, and now you know.

Habakkuk is one of the 12 so-called minor prophets, short books at the end of the Old Testament, sometimes called the Hebrew Scriptures. They are called minor because of their length, not because of their importance. Habakkuk is right in between too other not-so-well-known books: Nahum and Zephaniah. We heard about Jonah last week and in a few weeks, we’ll hear about Micah.

This is the only place Habakkuk is mentioned in our Bible. We don’t really know anything about the person Habakkuk beyond this book. Most scholars think the setting was around 600 BCE, right around the beginning of the time of exile.

The little book with just three chapters opens abruptly with Habakkuk bluntly asking God the age-old question:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

Habakkuk is troubled by warfare and corruption and suffering... and about people turning away from God’s law.

Habakkuk's question about God's seeming indifference to suffering echoes the book of Job, Psalm 13, and many other psalms.

God's response to Habakkuk's question is stunning, with God not planning to end the suffering but instead intending send the evil Chaldeans as an instrument of justice to inflict more suffering.

Habakkuk is stunned and confused. This is not the response he wanted, far from it. God is going to punish the people of Israel with the Chaldeans, a people who are even more evil? Habakkuk was seeking rescue and peace, not punishment.

Habakkuk resumes the dialogue with God, reminding God of God's identity, calling out: SLIDE

Your eyes are too pure to behold evil,
and you cannot look on wrongdoing;
why do you look on the treacherous,
and are silent when the wicked swallow
those more righteous than they?

It's almost like Habakkuk is calling God to be faithful, urging God be who God has claimed to be. Then Habakkuk decides to sit and wait for a response.

God's word comes, with the core message of Habakkuk at the beginning of chapter 2:

Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

⁴Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

The righteous will live by faith.

The rest of chapter two describes the woes of evil people, judgement on the nations for their idolatry, corruption, greed, and drunkenness.

Chapter three concludes with a different tone, sort of a song, singing of God's eventual vanquishing of all evil. It reminds a bit of Mary's song in Luke, a song about a future time when God will act to make things right.

The book concludes with Habakkuk having a new-found strength and trust in God, even though things are hard and challenging. Somehow Habakkuk has found faith, realizing the suffering and evil won't last forever.

Habakkuk writes, or sings:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

To me, this ending is not entirely satisfying. There is evil in the world, and we want God to fix it.

But there is no immediate solution, no easy answer, no magic wand.

All we get is a promise for the future and the challenging words: the righteous will live by faith.

So our task seems to be figuring out what living by faith involves.

As Presbyterians we know we can't simply focus on one verse of scripture; our tradition calls us to hear the full message of scripture.

Providentially our two previous “little books” can help.

Our first little book was James in the New Testament, and James makes it clear that faith must be put in action, that faith without works is dead. So James would encourage Habakkuk to do whatever was possible to make the world a better place, to not give up in the struggle for justice and righteousness.

And we heard from Jonah last week. Jonah might remind Habakkuk God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for all people. And Jonah would also probably tell Habakkuk that God calls us into faithful action, and if we miss the call, God will call a second time, and more if necessary.

And we can learn about living by faith from the eleventh chapter of Hebrews in the New Testament, not exactly a little book, but a little-known book.

Hebrews 11 is sort of a hall of fame of faith, listing people like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and David, and many more—all of whom lived by faith, doing what they thought God wanted them to do, even if they didn’t see the end result.

Hebrews 12 ties it together, encouraging God’s people to persevere, running the race of faith. The text seems to imply that living by faith is a marathon, not a sprint:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith... --Hebrews 12:1-2

And of course we can also learn about “living by faith” from Jesus, the one who called ordinary people to faithfully follow him, turning from sin, changing direction, and living for the sake of a new reality, the Kingdom of God, the Realm of God.

Jesus might tell Habakkuk that the Kingdom of God has begun but it is still coming, not yet here in its fullness.

Theologians call this the “in between time”, the time before God makes all things right.

God is not done with the world, and God is not done with us.

Martin Luther King Jr famously said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

The hope of that arc gives us the courage to live by faith, to live intentionally and purposefully wherever we are.

Listen how a different translation has the verse on the righteous living by faith:

But the person in right standing before God
through loyal and steady believing
is fully alive, *really* alive. --Hab 2:4b (*The Message*)

Living by faith means being really alive, focusing on the long-term, living with purpose, being loyal and steady with God.

A friend shared on Facebook about her nine year-old daughter who wanted to go to a local town march against racism.

She marched with others, with her sign that said: “Boo racism. Black lives matter.”

My friend asked her daughter what she achieved, and she replied:

"I think racism is like a huge steel wall that divides people. Tonight with the march I hit it with a brick. It may not have made a dent, but it made a weak spot. The next brick might make a dent. Soon there will be a hole."



Living by faith means we persevere every day, journeying together:

- Fighting racism and other evils
- Caring for each other, especially in pandemics
- Comforting each other in the valley of the shadow of death
- Encouraging each other, to stay rooted and grounded in God’s word and God’s love.

And this is a lifetime commitment—a marathon not a sprint—for those of us who call ourselves Christians, a daily disciple of striving to live by faith.

So we wake up in the morning, with the intention: “I am going to live by faith today.”

We give thanks to God for the gift of another day, praying that God would use us to make a difference.

We don’t simply put on our shirts and shorts in the morning, but we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, and love, as Colossians encourages us.

We put on our watches praying that God would help us to make good use of the time.

We make good choices with our words, our money, our lives—to serve God.

We read and watch the news and see what’s going on in the world not with a sense of despair, but instead looking for signs of hope, and listening for God’s call, so that we can discover more deeply every day how to live by faith.

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Let us pray—

Loving God, thank you for the gift of your word, which inspires us and challenges us. In the face of all the troubles of the world and struggles of our lives, give us renewed faith, hope, and love to encourage one another and to live as your people. In Jesus name, amen.