

TITLE SLIDE

Being Careful What We Ask For!
Habakkuk 1:1-11
September 8, 2024, West Valley Presbyterian Church

How many here have read the book of Habakkuk? How many have ever heard a sermon preached on it? (comment) I really like it, because it's in the format of dialogues with God. Habakkuk raises a question, and God answers it. The questions have to do with what was going on internationally in the Middle East of 2600 years ago. Habakkuk may not like the answers; but he does get them. And he ends his short book with a sung prayer acknowledging God's power in the world, and what our response should be.

We know very little about who Habakkuk was; we don't even know his proper Jewish name. The word "habakkuk" was Babylonian, not Hebrew; and it referred to some kind of plant. Like if I were to say that my name was Rutabaga or some such thing. Perhaps "Habakkuk" was a pen name so that the author could remain anonymous. We don't know.

What we do know is that Habakkuk was a prophet who lived at about the same time as the great prophet Jeremiah. Both of them were active before and after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon, roughly 2600 years ago. And what we also know is that the questions Habakkuk was asking then were not so much different from the questions we ourselves ask God now. We might not get direct answers to our questions; but Habakkuk did. And he wrote both his questions and God's answers down, to help all those who would come after him. Which includes us.

For this Sunday, we will look at Chapter 1:1-11, which is Habakkuk's first question, and God's answer to it. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from the book of Habakkuk.

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1 The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

(This is Habakkuk's first question, regarding Judah.)

²"How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.”

(And this is God's answer.)

⁵“Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told.

⁶I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.

⁸Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.

Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.

They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;

⁹ they all come intent on violence.

Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.

¹⁰They mock kings
and scoff at rulers.

They laugh at all fortified cities;
by building earthen ramps they capture them.

¹¹Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Habakkuk's first question is about Judah. At the time there was a lot of strife and conflict in that small nation. Israel – the Northern Kingdom – had already fallen to Assyria; and Assyria remained a potential external threat to Judah. There was also internal conflict within Judah. Jeremiah was preaching about how everyone needed to repent and live faithfully according to the Law. They had freely entered into a covenant that God had made with them, so they should be living up to that covenant. But the Temple priests, the elders, and the king, were doing their best to stop Jeremiah, because they felt he was demoralizing the people. They burned his writings, locked him up, and at one point threw him into a dry cistern.

Habakkuk is clearly on Jeremiah's side. He also sees Judah as unfaithful to the covenant that God had made with them. And what he does, is pray. He prays for a long time; as he says, “How long, Lord, must I call for help but you do not listen?” He asks God, “Why do you make me look at

injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails." And why is this happening? Because "the wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

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In other words, "Enough!" Like in the picture. Habakkuk sees violence; but what he wants is for God to save. And it's not happening. So he is saying, "God, why are you putting up with this? Why aren't you doing anything about it? We aren't living according to your Law, and our lives are a mess. There's conflict everywhere. There's no justice. Justice is perverted. It never prevails. Enough already! Do something!"

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And – sometimes we need to be careful what we ask for! God is doing something. But it's not the something that Habakkuk wanted, or was expecting. God says, "Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."

Was Habakkuk expecting comfort? Well, he didn't get that. What he got was the shock of an upcoming judgment.

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Was Habakkuk expecting God to judge them by means of the Assyrians? He didn't get that either. The Babylonians were even more ruthless in battle than the Assyrians were. And it's the Babylonians who are coming, says God. As commentators point out, character produces conduct; and the Babylonians were, as God says, "a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor....They all come intent on violence...they gather prisoners like sand... they mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities...(they are) guilty people, whose own strength is their god."

Which (surprise, surprise!) turned out to be quite true. The Babylonian armies did in fact sweep across the whole Middle Eastern region; they destroyed the Assyrians and took over their empire; they conquered most of what is now Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt; and of course they also conquered the land bridge between Asia and Africa that is Israel. If you're a ruler in what's now southern Iraq, and you want to conquer Egypt, the easiest way to get there is through Israel, right? The Babylonians were practical in their violence; they were indeed "a feared and dreaded people, a law unto themselves."

Centuries before this, the people living in Judah had entered into a covenant relationship with God as part of the people of Israel. God had brought them out of Egypt, given them the Law, claimed them and formed them as a people. The Law wasn't just a lot of rules about how to live your life; the Law was about how you live as God's people, in a close, personal relationship with him, surrendered to him. The Law was what the people did to uphold their end of the covenant. This covenant was an astonishing offer that God had made to this people. The God who created the entire universe, from atomic particles to galaxies, out of nothing - wants a relationship with people! And he chose to do so, starting with Abraham and Sarah. God takes covenants very seriously. When we

break a covenant with God, there are consequences. In the case of Judah, the consequence of not obeying the Law, was the invasion of Babylon.

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So how does this have anything to do with us? Well, we also are part of a covenant with God. It's not a nation-based covenant like what God established with Israel through Moses. We are not part of a nation-based covenant, because America was not formed that way. America was formed as a nation of religious freedom, where people could worship, or not, in any way that they saw fit (and was legal). We are not part of God's covenant because we are Americans; no, we are part of God's covenant because of what he did for everyone. Including us. God sent his Son Jesus to redeem us from our wrongdoing. Jesus set that covenant up for us, and gave himself as the covenantal sacrifice so that, for all of us, our sins could be forgiven. In fact we'll be celebrating that in a few minutes, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Remember? Matthew 26:27-28? "Then (Jesus) took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." As Christians, our sins are forgiven, because of Jesus. We are part of God's covenant because of Jesus. AND, we would do well to remember that God takes covenants seriously. If we break a covenant, again, there are consequences.

Let's think for a minute about our lives as Christians – as covenant partners, as our ECO denomination puts it. Are we living up to the covenant that God has made with us? For that matter, are Christians of any denomination living up to the covenant God has made with us? What do you think God would say about that?

Habakkuk asked God what he was doing about all the violence and injustice that he saw around him in Judah; and he was utterly amazed at God's reply. We have to be careful what we ask for! God was doing something, all right; but it wasn't something that Habakkuk wanted to hear. What if we asked God what he sees when he looks at us and all the people here in the South Bay?

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Here's what I'd like you to do: take out your bulletins and a pen or pencil. Let's all write down a couple of questions, asking God how he sees us Christians here in the South Bay in 2024. What are we doing well? What are we not doing so well? I won't ask you to share your questions, so be as honest with God as you can. Habakkuk was honest. He was aware that God already knew what he was thinking; so he might as well ask it, and listen for an answer. Same thing with us. God knows what we are thinking, so we might as well ask him whatever questions we have about living as a Christian. "God, how are we doing? Are we living faithfully as people redeemed through the blood of Jesus? What are we doing well? What are we not doing so well? What do you want us to do differently?" Let's take about a minute to do that. //

Maybe something came to mind for you – or maybe not. But either way, remember, that it's because God loves us that he wants us to live within his covenant. Because God loves us, he wants what's best for us. And God does know what is best for us – he knows that far better than we do. That is why he gave his one and only Son, to invite us into covenant and pour out his blood as the

sacrifice, so that we would not perish but have eternal life. God does take that covenant very seriously. Let's take it seriously as well. Let's pray.

Lord our God, you have claimed us as your own, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are your covenant people. We accept that we belong to you; and we ask that you would help us to grow in love as your faithful, covenanted people. Help us to hear you and follow you wherever you lead: in our church, in our neighborhood, and in our cities. For it is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.