

SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**SERMON** Sept 11 'Prayers: Getting Ticked" Habakkuk chapter 1

This is our final week of messages on prayers in scripture. It comes from a book most people don't have come straight to mind when thinking of the Bible. It comes from Habakkuk

Our scriptures are looking at the prayers of Habakkuk. Between them God does respond. In fact in Bibles with headings, Habakkuk's prayers are often listed as his "complaints." The feel is that Habakkuk has had enough. He's angry. He's angry at Judah and angry at God.

What is going on is Israel has already been exiled. The kingdom was split into Israel and Judah. Judah was in a place where day in and day out Habakkuk was witnessing evil on evil being done to one another. They had abandoned any sense of God's justice or desire for relationship.

There is a very telling and real sentiment expressed that is true now just as then. Because of all of the wickedness and disregard across the board, the Law had become "paralyzed" and justice doesn't prevail. We have a stark reminder here that rules only matter so long as people are humble and cooperative enough to follow them and to enforce them justly. Without this, the more the scales tip towards selfishness, indulgence, and wickedness the more impotent any previously agreed upon expectations and rules become.

Habakkuk has had enough. Why is God standing idly by and letting all of this transpire? How much is enough? Habakkuk wants an answer.

God replies and tells him that the Babylonians are coming to punish Judah. The Babylonians will overrun them and cart off another portion of the people to captivity, to exile.

Habakkuk has his answer but still isn't satisfied. The Babylonians are worse than Judah. How can God use a people worse than the ones being punished to do the punishing? The instruments of God's wrath seem to be charmed and rewarded for their ruthlessness by conquering after conquering. This makes no sense and so he expresses his displeasure to God.<sup>1</sup>

In essence he says "God help.....wait!....not that way!" I think of the many times my kids have asked for ideas of something to do or eat or whatever. They were offered idea after idea and the response was "not that, not that, not that."

When we ask for help, that help may not come in the form that we anticipate or want, but it may come. If God is behind it, we need to trust that even if that help seems to come uncomfortably there is reason for it.

God's response is to assure Habakkuk that yes, the Babylonians are wicked. Yes, they overrun and plunder. But ultimately they will have their own harshness repaid to them. There is a strange comfort in God's response that apparently registers with the prophet. Yes, Judah is going to have a harsh account for how far they've fallen. The unfairness is the assumption that the wicked force God will use to punish will get off scot free. They will not.

God's message is that there is a universal reckoning. It doesn't matter who we are God has a final word for all of us. In this case it is that the wicked will have their day. The other side of this is equally real. If the wicked will have their day, so will the righteous.

Somehow, some way we answer for the bad and get some kind of blessing for the good. We don't get to decide what, but we know it's on the way.

This is also the wonder of Christ. In all that we say and do, and while there is some reckoning, good and bad, at judgment, there is One who ultimately loves us enough that if we are in Him, makes up the difference for the bad to reconcile us to the ultimate good, God.

But back to the prayer.

Habakkuk shows us something magnificent about prayer and more importantly about God. God can handle our anger, even if that anger is directed Godward. We are human and struggle with every emotion and sometimes those emotions run away with us. God is perfect with a perfect love. Christ came and walked the human life, experiencing all the temptation the rest of us have. Through Christ there is an intimate understanding of the human experience, and through that same Christ grace is accomplished and offered.

We can even be childish. Though there is an extremity to the consequence and even correction God is using for Judah, the reaction smacks of childishness. I want help. Here's help. Not that help. We frustrate over others when they do that to us. Perhaps we frustrate God when we do it as well.

Yet in this exchange between God and Habakkuk we don't sense frustration. God is simply responding honestly and truthfully to the complaints. What has Habakkuk in a fit God has already thought through and made plans not just for the wicked of Judah but for the more wicked who will punish Judah.

As God reveals the fullness of the plan before Judah and beyond, the prophet seems to take real comfort. His final prayer in chapter 3 is one of praise for God and all God's greatness.

In other words in going to God with his anger, and calling out his own misgivings he is answered with something that brought him a sense of peace and restored his grasp of God's justice.

God is big enough to handle our anger and not get angry back at us.

In truth how do we ever release our anger unless we vent it? We do it with one another when a relationship is healthy and the other is able to handle it, respond, and if we are humble and open we move forward more connected than ever with new understanding and new appreciation.

With God it is no different, and far safer. We don't have to worry about God's reaction. God has no need to retaliate. The God of grace desires only that we come to reconciliation, not just with our salvation but also when we have an issue with God over something that has happened in our lives.

So we rant. We rail. We wail. All the while God is waiting for us to simply open and listen when we get done with saying our piece. Be open and listen for God's still voice that comforts, understands, and after we are done saying our piece brings the genuine peace of God.

We get angry and don't stop there. We work it out and work it through. On the other end our understanding of how God's hand is working in our lives grows and deepens. Our appreciation for God's patience, grace, and love humbles us and connects us more powerfully. And in letting go of that anger we move forward with a clearer mind and more steadied, peaceful heart.

## BIBLE STUDY Acts 21

In this chapter, Paul has moved on past Ephesus. The believers there had been heartbroken on his departure. They were made aware that they wouldn't see him again, which was a great loss to them and every other community Paul had begun. At the same time, Paul is assured that he is headed to Rome for a spiritual purpose and has made his peace with the reality that it is there that he will meet his end.

But first, Paul must make a stop in Jerusalem.

On the way there is a stop-over in Tyre. Paul goes to seek out the believers there. This is a significant note. Paul has started many communities. This isn't one of them. As such he doesn't know the specifics of who and where, only that they are there. So he seeks them out. What follows demonstrates that they embraced Paul and walked with him.

The scene is one of amazing Christian unity. Paul isn't a snob who only spends time with people he's converted personally. He seeks out believers wherever he goes. Fellow believers are a source of strength and solidarity. They uplift and aid. That these followers readily accepted Paul may have been due to more than one thing. Certainly Paul's reputation may have preceded him. Still, their generosity can't be dismissed. The Christian church is a welcoming and generous one. As they interacted they became aware that Paul's Jerusalem destination was fraught with danger. This is the sense of "the Spirit" in their discernment. We don't know completely whether or not it was that the Spirit let them know of Paul's destination and they were overcome with concern or if they became aware of Paul's destination and because of their love in the Spirit the concern arose. What we do know is that Paul is certain of where he needs to go and the end result is that these brothers and sisters worry for his safety.

Love causes us to worry for one another. Love causes us to want to spare each other from pain. This is a good thing. At the same time, there are seasons where going through pain is what we must do for the sake of the gospel and our own faith. This is where Paul is. He knows what he must do. It's not about the physical experience but the spiritual call. The result is that in convincing them of his mission/destination they accept it and do the one responsible, supportive thing they can do. They pray. Each and every one with him gathers on the beach and prays as he departs.

And again, this is unity. It's not about ourselves but about one another. It's not about my agenda, but the Holy Spirit's. So we come together in trust and mutuality before God and trudge forward together.....even when it's hard.

Paul's next major stop takes him to Caesarea and Phillip.

Where did Paul's journey begin? Jerusalem with the stoning of Stephen. Phillip as "one of the seven" is one of those who was selected along with Stephen to distribute food to widows. Phillip is one of those faithful men who were scattered when Paul went on his rampage to stamp out Christians in Jerusalem. Phillip is the one who left to establish Christian communities outside of Jerusalem due to Paul's pressure. The one Paul terrorized now welcomes him as a brother. They are now of one faith and one family. How ironic. Their faith breaks down the walls of bitterness or fear. It unites and connects them. What would the world look like today if we could allow this to happen amongst Christians? Let the Lord change us, and let the Lord connect us in unity.

Phillip's integrity as a pastor is highlighted in the inclusion of daughters. In a world where men are elevated and women often subjugated, Phillip's daughters are uplifted. They are not just single, but they are faithful. They prophesy. Prophecy is not just a man's game here in Christ.

The bottom line is that in Phillip, Luke is telling us that Paul's journey has come full circle. It begins and ends here, even though ultimately he will be pulled to Rome on the other side of this Jerusalem moment.

Once again, Paul's fate is foretold. Agabus comes and predicts Paul's demise in Jerusalem. Paul has other ideas in mind but nevertheless the believers rally to his side. The prophecy is information, not instruction. They don't want to lose Paul and so they come to him demanding he not go to Jerusalem.

Paul's response is loving and gracious. He speaks of heartbreak even as he reveals his knowledge and acceptance of his ultimate fate. This is a very Christlike response. Jesus knew his destiny and despite the disciple's resistance ran to it for our behalf. Paul is willing to meet his end faithfully and with resolve. That his followers are torn breaks his heart but he knows what he must do.

Again, another witness for us. What is faithful isn't always easy. But it isn't about us. It's about God and one another. We follow because we trust that overall it makes a Kingdom difference far about a personal one.

Along these lines in a different way, Paul's example here, before, and as we look forward has lent itself to bad theology.

Paul meets with resistance everywhere he goes. Jerusalem will be no different. There is a sense amongst many Christians that to experience resistance and even anger or hatred is a sign we are doing "the Lord's work." This isn't necessarily true. It was in Paul's case, but anger, rejection, and so forth isn't a guarantee that we're doing God's work.

Sometimes, many times, rejection isn't because someone is doing the Lord's work. It's because they are rude and judgmental. People aren't jailed because they are doing the "Lord's work". They are criminals. The equation isn't that simple. Assuming I'm "doing the Lord's work" isn't an excuse to not look in the mirror and blame others for whatever consequence I'm experiencing. We absolutely must be willing to reflect and see things for what they are. Is it a "Paul's faithfulness" situation or is it a "I'm not reflecting the authenticity of Jesus" situation?

They let him go on his way. But not without a prophecy from Agabus who tells Paul that he'll be bound, and turned over from the Jews to the Gentiles in Jerusalem. Indeed this prophecy is part of the consternation of these believers.

Soon after arriving in Jerusalem another council of James and the elders is convened. They hear Paul's missionary journeys and are glad and praise God for his fruitfulness. Where Paul was under suspicion earlier in his ministry, now he's proven himself much to the delight of the leadership of the Jerusalem church.

Sadly, rumors have spread. Paul is being accused of essentially betraying his Jewish heritage. In Jerusalem this particular rumor mill is a big issue. Jerusalem Christians are largely still observant Jews. They are simply Jews who have accepted Christ as savior. In culture, heritage, and legacy they are still very Jewish. To think that now there is a Jew who is preaching that Jews don't need to be, or even shouldn't be, Jewish in order to be Christian is a far stretch.

For Jews who haven't accepted Christ it's even moreso.

The council is happy with Paul's wonderful success. In Jerusalem he is in danger. So they give him an instruction/idea. There are several men prepared to observe the Jewish ritual to be consecrated to God. This is the likely the same ritual/vow Paul took earlier in Acts when he "shaved his head because of a vow". In order to let everyone know that he's not the guy they've been told he is, he's asked to re-institute this vow himself and pay the expense of these other guys who are taking that same vow.

To restore his own reputation Paul is asked to publicly demonstrate that he is still in cahoots with Jewish tradition and vows.

This isn't a stretch for Paul who seems to quickly and easily do so. He is an observant Jew. For all of his rhetoric and writing that Gentiles shouldn't be roped into being required to be Jewish in order to be Christian, he himself is still observantly Jewish. He sees the value in preserving his heritage even in the context of Christianity, he just doesn't see the need to force non Jews to do so as well as a requirement of faith.

This is significant. There is a difference between cultural heritage and religious requirement. There are many different

cultural traditions around the world that are meaningful to a people. Observing them doesn't mean they are any less Christian, nor does it mean that those who don't observe them are any less Christian. They are culturally meaningful to people of a particular culture.

Despite bending to this, it doesn't seem to matter. Paul has a sect of Jews riling up the people. They are Jews from Asia. It's likely this is the same sect from Ephesus that followed him around earlier in Acts. They are motivated not only to discount his message but to see him killed and taken out of the picture. Sadly they are able to create a scene not uncommon to Paul. They create a scene of violence and chaos.

In their aggravation they end up enacting the prophecy of Agabus. They beat Paul. And in eventuality they turn him over to the Gentile authorities shackled. When the Romans see the chaos ensuing they step in to settle it down. They do this by arresting Paul. This may seem odd. Why are they arresting the one being beaten rather than the ones doing the beating?

First we need to understand the timing. It is during a festival time for the Jews, Pentecost. We associate the term with Christianity because of the coming of the Holy Spirit. We shouldn't forget that the reason so many diverse Jews heard that first address of Peter was because they'd come to observe a Jewish tradition....Pentecost.

Jewish festivals were a particularly prickly time in terms of Romans keeping a lid on the peace. This was when this particular people became a bit more emotional. Emotional means prone towards mob mentality, and so the authorities were likely tuned in to make sure if anything got rowdy it didn't go beyond a point.

In terms of the arrest, we can look to a recent local event to understand the action. A couple years ago a United Methodist associate pastor went to the Gettysburg battlefield to visit the graves of relative who'd passed at that battle. As he did so he was accosted by a large group of radical right, armed protestors there to guard historical landmarks. This pastor was wearing a Black Lives Matter t-shirt and became their target. He appealed to them kindly and as a pastor. None of it mattered. They were riled up and aggressive towards him. A park security officer came and addressed the pastor, not the crowd. He secured the pastor and escorted him away. The pastor was a little confused. Why was he "held accountable" being the victim and not the aggressive crowd?

The officer explained that the priority was keeping the pastor safe. Addressing the crowd in that moment wouldn't have been productive. So he secured the victim and moved him away for his own well-being.

Perhaps this is what happened here. Yes, to the common sense onlooker the crowd that was beating Paul needed accused and held accountable. But the more imminent need was Paul's safety. That's what was addressed in the situation.

On Paul's part this wasn't uncommon. We've seen time and again that Paul has been abused and imprisoned for the cause of his mission. It's highly likely that we at this point are more offended than he is. Paul's probably assimilated it into the model of his ministry. "Yup.....of course it's time for the beating...." At the same time maybe he also recognized that his being taken by the authorities was a means of God's grace to preserve his life for Rome, which he knew to be his final destination.

When Paul is eventually secured in the barracks, aside from the angry mob, he asks to speak to them. An interesting exchange occurs first. He asks to address the crowd and then he's asked if he speaks Greek. That he can is no surprise in that time. He's asked if he's an Egyptian rebel. He retorts his point of origin and it's oddly immediately accepted.

Why? Why would the immediately accept his word that he's not the man they suspect he is?

The answer is dialect. Speaking Greek, his dialect would reveal his point of origin Paul being from Tarsus his dialect would be very different from someone from Egypt. So as soon as he opened his mouth speaking Greek it became evident that he could not be the man they were wondering about.

In our own time consider it this way. The authorities are looking for someone unavoidably, inherently, grossly from Alabama. In conversation they immediately have an unmistakable, thick, inherent south Boston accent. Simply by the way the person speaks they reveal they can't be the perpetrator.

This chapter shows us just how incredibly intentional Luke is in his telling of the story in Acts. He shows us the full circle nature of Paul's journey. He reveals cultural realities and textures to Christianity then that continue to be relevant today. He shows us resolve to carry out God's will despite the misgivings of other genuinely loving and faithful friends and companions. As Acts winds down there is no let down in what we find to guide and help shape our faith today. Truly timeless, people are the same now as they ever were, and so Luke's telling of the early church continues to resonate with the church today.