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10/10/2010

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:38

Faith

I. *Seeks*

II. *Hopes*

III. *Acts*

Habakkuk 1:1-3;2:1-4

Tired yet anxious the man took one last inventory of his knapsack before climbing the tall ladder to the top of the watchtower. Blanket, check; canteen of water, check; but most important of all, the message tablet, check. If everyone's worst fears materialized and the enemy was finally launching an attack against the city message would immediately be sent to the king who would round up the troops for battle. Habakkuk paused and uttered a short prayer to God. "Lord, may I remain alert this whole night and may you forgive us our sins and keep us from our enemies."

Habakkuk was a watchman, he was also tired. Does anyone really learn to sleep well during the day to stay awake all night and keep watch hour after hour watching nothing, being bored but also hoping beyond all hope nothing would happen. Seeing something meant one thing: the city was under attack by the Babylonian army--a godless, merciless enemy of the Israelites and of God. Habakkuk had short periods of sleep abruptly interrupted by bad dreams often causing him to pray intensely to God.

For centuries the Jews struggled against the Assyrian Empire. The glory days of the Israelite nation seemed like ancient history—and in some ways it was. It was already over three hundred years since Solomon died, dividing the nation in his wake. More than a hundred years had passed since the Assyrians destroyed the northern half of the kingdom leaving the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south alone.

Now a new enemy arouse—the Babylonians. Strong enough to defeat Assyria and strong and arrogant enough to take their time to invade Judah at their convenience. This is what Habakkuk had to guard against; these people—enemies of God—were what Habakkuk had to watch night after night. It seemed like nothing could stop Babylon and they would attack at any moment.

Just four short years earlier things had been much different. Josiah was king and his reforms gave the Jews a reinvigorated faith and dedication to God. The idolatrous altars were torn down and even the book of the law had been found and the people's hearts were once again being turned towards God. Then it all ended, too soon for the reforms to fully take effect. Josiah

had foolishly gone to battle against the Egyptians and lost his life. Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz had lasted but a mere three months. Now Jehoiakin sat on the throne, one of the most ungodly self-centered evil kings. How could God not judge and punish His people? Thank God for such powerful preachers as Jeremiah. Maybe he can rouse the people to repentance. Surely he a man of God speaking the truth.

It seemed Habakkuk couldn't find peace anywhere he went. When he was on the wall watching the Babylonians in their arrogance and pride his anger burned. When he was with his people watching their own indifference and arrogance he was even angrier.

Atop the wall at his post Habakkuk, so caught up in his prayers to God, didn't notice he was speaking them out loud. **"How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen. Or cry to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."** (verses 2-4).

Far from being unfaithful or ungodly Habakkuk did what every person converted by the Holy Spirit does when faced with the ugliness and sin of the world: he turned to God for answers and healing. How different Habakkuk was from most of his fellow countrymen who sat in bitter silence angry towards God who had seemed to stop blessing them. How different from so many of his country men who thought nothing bad would befall them despite their wickedness and sin.

Habakkuk was a man of faith. Faith seeks God at all times but especially when times are tough. It was always the case for the faithful. Did not Abraham have to seek after God having become old and beyond child bearing years. But God of course did not leave Abraham without hope or empty handed for Abraham and Sarah had the promise of God that they would indeed become a great nation. Or how about Noah who upwards of a very century built the ark that was laughed at by others. He too have to wait but he waited with the knowledge that his labor in building the ark was not in vain and that God would judge the world of sin. Faith seeks God because the faithful are forced to wait for the Lord. By God's grace His people wait in hope because the faithful are called to seek God who gives them promises and a future in Him.

Habakkuk grew tense, his hands began to clench into fists and he breathing became rough. What if tonight is he night the Babylonians attack? What if in their hardness of heart they end up killing Jeremiah and silencing the voice of God? What will happen to me and my family if we are overrun? Habakkuk caught himself. Is this what the man of God does? Habakkuk in

faith knew what he needed to do. Seek God, wait on Him and keep the hope given in ages past. Habakkuk was on top of the city wall and he had a job to do. Watch for the enemy. Do what God has called you to do and act in faith. Here Habakkuk found peace and focus. **"I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint."** (verse 2:1)

God is there and He is not silent. God hears the prayers of His people and He does respond. Noah was promised that he and his family would live and be saved in God's grace and in fact that is what happened as they survived the flood. Abraham and Sarah had in fact become a great nation. That nation was given the promise of God to that great king David that the Savior would come, that God's people would not be forgotten nor destroyed. God had spoken to all of them and now in response to Habakkuk's prayers He would speak to Habakkuk too. **"Write down the revelation and make it plain on the tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time, it speaks of the end and it will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and it will not delay. 'See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright--but the righteous will live by his faith...'"** (verses 2-4).

We don't know what happened to Habakkuk but we do have his message—words of faith and hope. We do know what happened to the Jews: Babylon did eventually attack, not once but four times. The fourth and last time in 586BC Jerusalem was leveled and the Temple torn down. Judgment fell on God's people.

Jeremiah fled to Egypt where he eventually died. Young men of God like Ezekiel and Daniel were carried off to Babylon where in exile the gospel message would be kept safe for the appointed time.

We do not know how Habakkuk died but we do know what happened at the moment of his death. Like every man and woman of faith Habakkuk was welcomed into the full presence of God's glory and was united with every believer of every age.

Today we are reminded that while things may seem bad and the world around us evil there have always been difficult times for God's people. Some far worse than today. The people of God live today as they always have lived—by faith. Faith which seeks God and hears his promises. Faith which hopes in the knowledge that with God on their side they are already victorious. Faith which acts knowing it is the very work of God in this world. Amen.