

**October 30, 2016**

*Habakkuk's pronouncement represents the prophet's attempt to explain the significance of the rise of the Babylonian empire and its domination of Judah. Although Habakkuk views the Babylonians as wicked oppressors of the righteous, he maintains that the rise of Babylon is an act of God, the true master of the world. The first part of the reading details Habakkuk's first complaint and protests to God about the breakdown of order in the land. The second part of the reading reports God's response to the complaint of Habakkuk as he is told to write down the vision that he has been given.*

**Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4**

<sup>1</sup>The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it:

<sup>2</sup>God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen?

How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you come to the rescue?

<sup>3</sup>Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day?

Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place.

<sup>4</sup>Law and order fall to pieces.

Justice is a joke.

The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.

<sup>1</sup>What's God going to say to my questions? I'm braced for the worst.

I'll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon.

I'll wait to see what God says, how he'll answer my complaint.

Full of Self, but Soul-Empty

<sup>2</sup>And then God answered: "Write this.

Write what you see.

Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run.

<sup>3</sup>This vision-message is a witness pointing to what's coming.

It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait!

And it doesn't lie.

If it seems slow in coming, wait.

It's on its way. It will come right on time.

<sup>4</sup>"Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—full of himself but soul-empty.

But the person in right standing before God through loyal and steady believing is fully alive, really alive.

*In all three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus approaches Jerusalem through Jericho, but only Luke has the story of Zacchaeus. As part a chief tax collector Zacchaeus is part of the corrupt system of economic oppression that keeps the people living the way that they are currently living. In response to hearing about Jesus, Zacchaeus goes beyond the law's requirement for restitution and Jesus calls to him. Jesus then enters his house and the pronouncement of Jesus at the end of their interaction is addressed to the crowd rather than to Zacchaeus himself.*

### **Luke 19:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. <sup>2</sup>There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. <sup>3</sup>He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home."

<sup>6</sup>Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. <sup>7</sup>Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?"

<sup>8</sup>Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages."

<sup>9</sup>Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

**THANKS BE TO GOD!**

### **Sermon – "Where is God?"**

In 2011/2012 Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz was commissioned to do a statue of Jesus that was to be displayed in Toronto. Schmalz has had a great deal of experience in these types of commissions as he is, by trade, a religious sculpture. So first making an original out of clay, which by the way is still at his home, he created a rubber mold from the clay original and they had a company that does castings, cast a bronze rendition of the statue. Once the statue was finished controversy erupted very quickly. The sculpture it seems was rejected by officials responsible for two prominent Catholic churches, St. Michael's Cathedral

in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Rectors at both cathedrals thought favourably of the piece, but they were overruled by higher authorities in the New York and Toronto archdioceses. With no place to put the sculpture it sat in a crate for over a year, when it was finally installed in 2013 in front of the University of Toronto's Regis College on Wellesley St. W., the Jesuit graduate faculty of theology. This is not the only controversy around this sculpture as there have been copies commissioned for other places around the world; in London, Methodist Central Hall, across from Westminster Abbey, wanted to install it in front of its church, but the City of Westminster's council rejected that, saying the sculpture would fail to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Westminster Abbey and Parliament Square conservation area. An online petition has been launched to try to overturn that decision. Another church in London, St Martin-in-the-Fields, rejected the statue because there were fears the statue would expose the church to ridicule, according to the Church Times.

Does anyone know what this statue looks like?

It is a statue of Jesus and it is called "Jesus, the homeless" and depicts Jesus as a homeless person sleeping on a park bench with wounds in his feet and his head covered with a blanket. It has now been installed in front of the offices of the Catholic Charities in the Vatican.

It seems that the controversy has a lot to do with how Jesus has been depicted in the statue. In 2014 National Public Radio examined the controversy and found one critic who found, **"Some neighbors feel that it's an insulting depiction of the son of God, and that what appears to be a hobo curled up on a bench demeans the neighborhood."**, **"Another neighbor, who lives a couple of doors down from the church, wrote us a letter to the editor saying it creeps him out,"** It seems that Jesus should always be depicted in glory and radiance as a God of power.

Habakkuk much like Joel, from last week, would be considered one of the minor prophets of Israel. This book is a very short 3 chapters in length. This is one of those books in the bible that can lead to many interesting questions and conversation, even though it is only 3 chapters long. One of the problems is that it can be very difficult to speak to the verses this morning without actually giving the context of the entire book and what Habakkuk is actually speaking about. To be honest most people have barely heard about this book; let alone what it actually says. So I am thinking that it might be a good start if we do a quick overview of the book itself.

What is the main message of this book? It basically can be summed up in one easy statement, “the righteous live by faith.” This one statement seems simple enough, but what does it really mean? So basically the book tries to set out what it means by the term righteous person and what it also means to live by faith. The book begins with a lament to God. In it the prophet asks God why life in Judah is so unjust. This lament can be seen as a condemnation of God, but it actually is not that. Habakkuk in lamenting the injustice of the world is actually condemning God’s people who have not lived up to what it means to be God’s people. In the second chapter of the book, God actually answers the cries of Habakkuk and states that God is sending the Babylonians as an act of judgement. Habakkuk once again cries out to God in response to the message of judgement. As Rolf Jacobson, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minn, states, “‘Wait a second, God, isn’t that worse?’ Habakkuk protests that God’s act of judgement is even more unjust than the injustice that God is supposed to be punishing.” After this second complaint Habakkuk waits to hear if he will get an answer from God. Habakkuk finally receives his second answer from God, in which God promises that he will give Habakkuk a vision. The thing is that God does not tell Habakkuk when the vision will come, only that it will come, but in the meantime Habakkuk is challenged to live only by faith. The vision does eventually come to Habakkuk, but when it does it is in many ways terrifying. It is a vision about the coming of a Holy God who will not be domesticated by human expectations. In other words it is a vision of God’s glory far beyond what human can ever imagine. The book ends with a song of praise to God in response to this vision of God. The song speaks about how people are called to have faith in God not only in times of good fortune and plenty, but rather at all times.

Our second reading from Luke tells the story of Zacchaeus. Once again for the second week in a row we hear the story of a tax collector. As with last week we must remember that a tax collector is someone who in many ways does not fit into society, he is a member of the elite, but as we heard last week he would be at the bottom of the elite, not really being able to actually even support his own family. He also would not fit in with the rest of society because in order to support his family he would have to extort money from others, he would be the community bully. So here is Zacchaeus trying to see Jesus and not being allowed in, trying to find God and in many ways worried that he would be able to see God. And I think that this is where we are in the world today.

We live in a world where it can be really difficult to see God. Much like Zacchaeus where the crowds were limiting his view, there are so many things that happen in the world today that can really obscure our view of God in the world. Our vision is clouded by politics, by natural disasters, by tragedies and suffering. And because this happens we can really end up like Habakkuk, we can begin to question where God is in the world. Habakkuk was questioning what was happening in his world and was questioning God as to where God might be in the midst of suffering. How many of us have wondered the exact same thing? How many have wondered with all of the suffering in the world, where is God? Is God even present and aware? In 1971 a singer won a Grammy award for a song that begins with the lyrics, **“I beg your pardon.”** Who knows this song? The song “Rose Garden” speaks to our difficulty in the world today, it speaks about the fact that life is never only made up of the good times, rather life is by nature full of both times of sunshine, but also times of rain. **“I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden. Along with the sunshine, there’s got to be a little rain sometime.”** This is just what Habakkuk is questioning, what is happening during those times of rain. And the answer is found in both Habakkuk and the story of Zacchaeus.

In God’s second answer to Habakkuk, God states that Habakkuk is to write the vision that he receives. But he is not to just write it, but rather he is to write it in such a way that even someone who is running by can see and read what it has to say. What it says is that even in those times of trouble, even in those times of difficulty, God is always with us. As Zacchaeus was called by Jesus up in the tree, we are being always being called by God to believe, to trust, and to know that we are not alone. The anthem this morning tells us, **“When I’m weary or troubled, when I’m filled with despair, when I lonely or grieving, I know You are there.”** We are challenged to have faith not only in the good times, but also in the troubled times. Where is God? As Habakkuk learned even when we feel that we are alone, God is with us. If we could have a huge billboard that we could see every day that would remind us of this, that would be great, but we don’t. So, we are challenged to find God in all places, even as the homeless in the park. I think that this is why Timothy Schmalz’s sculpture is so important because it can serve to remind us that God is truly everywhere, even in those places where we might not think God is present.