

December 2, 2018

Five Goats

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Habakkuk 1:1-2:20

1 *The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.*

[Habakkuk's Complaint]

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? 3 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. 4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

[The Lord'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. 6 I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. 7 They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. 8 Their 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. 10 They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; by building earthen ramps they capture them. 11 Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—guilty people, whose own strength is their god."

[Habakkuk's Second Complaint]

12 Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die. You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. 13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? 14 You have made people like the fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler. 15 The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. 16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. 17 Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy? 2 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.

[The Lord's Answer]

2 Then the Lord replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. 3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it

speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

⁴ “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—⁵ indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.

⁶ “Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, “Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?” ⁷ Will not your creditors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their prey. ⁸ Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.

⁹ “Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain, setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin! ¹⁰ You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. ¹¹ The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

¹² “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by injustice!

¹³ Has not the Lord Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? ¹⁴ For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁵ “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies! ¹⁶ You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup from the Lord’s right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory. ¹⁷ The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.

¹⁸ “Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. ¹⁹ Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.” ²⁰ The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.

Here we are again on the first Sunday of the Christian year, when preachers turn to the prophets to make the case all over again, in a world already full of religion, *Why Jesus?* Small-town and as unknown as he may be, Habakkuk puts words to it as well as anybody ever did.

This is from the Pastor-Annette,-slightly-snarky-and-very-free translation: *This is a sorry world full of faithless people, God. And I don't know why you make me look at it. Furthermore, I don't know why you let it be this way?*

As Howard Thurman puts it, *Why does the God of right permit the rule of wrong?* It is the most universal of religious questions. In Habakkuk, chapters 1 and 2 God answers, but not to the prophet's satisfaction, *Look and See!* *Look and see* is God's second favorite thing to say, after *do not be afraid*.

Look and see something you would not believe. I am rousing the Chaldeans as they march the face of the earth. Chaldeans is another word for Babylonians, the way Hoosiers is another word for Americans. Hear that? God answers the prophet's question about why God lets evil rule by saying, *I'm the one stirring up that trouble!*

Turns out, God is absolutely right in verse 5: nobody wants to believe that. So the prophet does what people always do. He keeps asking, pretending he hasn't heard a thing God said, just waited his turn to talk again. *Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, And you cannot look on wrongdoing.* Did God say that? No. God did not say how he could not bear to look at the Chaldeans. But that's what Habakkuk heard, apparently. Before asking the perennial religious question again, *Why do you look on the treacherous and keep silent as wicked people consume good people?*

The prophet goes on a bit about those nasty Chaldeans and decides, *Fine, I am going to stay right here until God answers me, his rampart and watchpost. I'll just stay right here and watch to see what God will say regarding my complaint.*

Write this down, God says next; *write it so plain that people can read it while on the run, so anyone asking later can read the answer I am giving now.* Which Habakkuk did, obviously, since, here we are. But have we read the answer? Are we any more satisfied with God's response than Habakkuk and the Judeans were back then, than religious people have been since?

Let's pray. *Give us hearts and minds, O God, brave enough to see and hear what you would have us see and hear. Amen.*

My sermon title has evolved over the last few days, from "Things That Really Get God's Goat" to "What Gets God's Goat," to "Five Goats." Many commentaries refer to chapter 2 as "the five woes," but I like the alliteration of *get God's goat.* And everyone knows that awesome alliteration is two-thirds of good preaching.

If we asked, *why doesn't 2+2=yellow?* and God said, "*Because yellow isn't a number,*" we'd be satisfied. But when we ask, *why does God allow suffering?* and God answers, *You bring this suffering upon yourselves and I hate it as much as you do,* all we know to do is to repeat the question. By the time God tries to explain God's self, we've stopped listening again. But if we could keep watching and listening, we'd see something of God's answer in the five goats of Habakkuk, chapter 2.

Care to guess the origin of [*get one's goat*](#)? Or maybe you already know it? It comes from a tradition in horse racing. Thought to have a calming effect on high-strung thoroughbreds, a goat was placed in the horse's stall on the night before the race. Unscrupulous opponents would then steal the goat – *get his goat!* – in an effort to upset the horse so he will run poorly and lose the race.

Things that *get God's goat* are the things that make God jumpy, angry, out of sorts, make God be other than God most wants to be, for us and with us. Five of the things that get God's goat are:

Plundering Theft;
Pervasive Exploitation;
Perpetual Conquest;
Perennial Oppression; and
Perilous Idolatry,

all perpetrated by the Haves against the Have-Nots, by those who have political/economic/social power against those who don't. Not only does the prophet name them, but he also describes their effect on everyone involved: the Haves and the Have-Nots.

Plundering theft. Google images of *looting* are mostly of brown and black people smashing storefronts to steal TV's. That's wrong, but not even close to all that's wrong. I could talk more or show you a cartoon which says it better than I ever can: [Rang-Tan in My Bedroom](#). And it's not just monkeys, but people. People in Indonesia, whose land got taken away and [sold by the state to palm-oil companies](#). From forest to storefront, the two are not unrelated, friends, as much as we would like to believe otherwise. The Haves cannot pillage endlessly and expect the pillaged to put up with it forever.

The Bible says they won't, on this very page.

⁷ *Will not your creditors suddenly arise?
Will they not wake up and make you tremble?
Then you will become their prey.*

⁸ *Because you have plundered many nations,
the peoples who are left will plunder you.
For you have shed human blood;
you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.*

Goat-getter #2: **Pervasive exploitation** (verses 9-11).

⁹ *"Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high to escape the clutches of ruin!"*

¹⁰ *You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.*

¹¹ *The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it."*

We who have built our houses in safe neighborhoods, where we can't see the effects of this economy on those it robs, how it takes advantage of the desperation of people with few options for education and work – it is all one economy, all one system. *And it's built on sand*, to borrow from Jesus's parable in Matthew 7. The same way all the stones hold up the wall and all the framing holds up the house, in a system built on sand – corrupt from top to bottom – being closer to the top will not keep us safe.

Goat # 3, Perpetual Conquest.

"Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity!"

¹³ *Is it not from the Lord of hosts that people labor only to feed the flames, and nations weary themselves for nothing?*

¹⁴ *But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

Nations built on blood and cities built on crime. In his commentary on these verses, Howard Thurman wrote that every place called *civilized* is born of conquest. And that every one will fail, until humans know God the way water knows the sea. We cannot act against the ways of God and please God at the same time.

We can pretend, of course, which was one source of Judah's agony. The prophet gives voice to their frustration, demanding to know why God treats them so. But the sound of their own terror drowns out what they most need to hear. Maybe greed is just another shape fear takes. The more we have of what humans need, the safer we feel. And the safer we feel, the less able we are to discern the difference between safety and opulence, bringing us to the fourth goat.

Perennial oppression. What makes something *perennial*? It can reseed itself. Mint and lemon balm are the most persistent perennials in my yard, and they are less perennial than the oppression of humans upon humans.

¹⁵ *"Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies!*

Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory.

¹⁷ *The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them."*

Again, the tyrannized will tolerate it so long as they have something left to lose, but hardly longer. Why do you think people risk their children drowning in the sea or being tear-gassed by our soldiers? Because they've so little left to lose otherwise. Had we eyes

to see, we would see this prophecy playing out before us now: *the violence you have done will overwhelm you.* In reference to Judah's violence, the text speaks of *Lebanon*. For these times, we can write in most anywhere brown people live: Central America, the Middle East, Alabama, American inner cities, and so many other places. We cannot trap people militarily or economically or socially and expect them to tolerate it endlessly. Our ancestors didn't. People are meant to be free and treated as beings made by God in God's image. How you know God wants us to treat our loved ones is how God wants us to treat everyone.

Finally, the fifth goat, **Perilous Idolatry**.

¹⁹ "Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'
Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!'
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it."

Call dead things live. Call live things dead. Call good things bad and bad things good for long enough, eventually you won't be able to tell the difference – nor need to, maybe, once no moral bar exists, save the one that serves oneself. What is valuable to Empire? What is valuable to God? What is valuable to us, and what has that to do with life?

Again, friends, again, again, again, Judah thought she was the victim of Assyria and Babylon. The prophet's task was to show herself to herself, that she herself had plundered, exploited, and oppressed, and all the while lived by a story, a theology even, of God's goodness to her that took no account of the abuse she inflicted on others. That was violation of the Mosaic covenant, plain and simple, the consequences for which they had always known and the prophets had continually reminded them of.

They could refuse to know what they knew by pretending not to understand. They could refuse to listen. They could refuse to see. They could refuse to change. But finally, what they could not do was save themselves – save themselves from a faithless world full of sorry people who had created a mess that the best of them were not smart or good or strong enough to redeem.

Therefore, Jesus, the one in our other text today, asking those who would follow him the same question, giving the same invitation God issues to Habakkuk and Judah: *Watch with me. Watch and see this thing that I am about to do.* Shall we? Shall we be the ones who see and hear God's answer to this world's troubles?

Welcome, dear ones, to another season of watching and following. Would you pray with me?