

One of the blessings, or some might say curses, of being a preacher who goes on vacation is that I usually spend the first week decompressing and getting out of my head. Sometimes it takes more than a week as it did this time. Even as I was helping Mikayla get packed and ready to move, I was still in that mode of questioning the world around me and how it interplays with God’s activity among us. It is an occupational hazard. I find myself sliding into some pretty weird conversations with myself and this time was no different. Trying to look with new eyes, I am mindful that there is still so much to discover and be curious about. As Albert Einstein surmised, “It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education...The important thing is to never stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.” For example, as we were navigating LA traffic, I saw a hearse and couldn’t help but wonder, “Can a hearse carrying a corpse drive in the carpool lane?” Packing up Mikayla’s clothes, I questioned why it is that a bra is singular while panties are plural (and I hope Mikayla isn’t watching right now because underwear is one of those forbidden topics I’m not supposed to talk about)? Dragging my baggage to check-in, I questioned how is it that we put a man on the moon before we figured out it would be a good idea to put wheels on luggage? As we listened to the flight attendant make her announcements, I couldn’t help but wonder “Why are there flotation devices under plane seats instead of parachutes?” and “Why can’t the whole plane be made out of that same indestructible substance as those little black boxes we hear about once a plane crashes?” In New York, we got to play tourist in addition to unpacking and getting settled in. Visiting the Empire State building, I pondered why we were paying to go up this skyscraper only to pay again at the top to look through binoculars towards the ground? What is that about? Some New Yorkers, like Californians, aren’t big on tourists getting in their way. Remembering that in deer season, deer get shot and in duck season, ducks get shot, I wondered what they meant for tourist season? All questions, mostly silly, but with no real answers.

Take away the comedy, and you have the predicament of the prophet Habakkuk, a questioner of life and God’s activity within it. His curiosity is plagued with suffering and pain for the people around him. Making playful light of his situation was a luxury he could not afford as the people of Judah were being subjected to rampant corruption and injustice. Habakkuk

questions in chapter 1, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you, “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make see wrong-doing and look at trouble... the law has become slack and justice never prevails.” This is a questioning of the world which is spawned out of torment, fear, and a disconnect between the way the world is supposed to be and how it really is. It is the age-old question of Job, the psalmist, prophets, and even Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time who questioned Jesus about who sinned to cause a young man’s illness? It is that timeless pondering, how do we justify the goodness and power of God with the presence of evil?

There is a wonderful scene in the film “Grand Canyon,” where the main character, an immigration attorney, is driving home late at night from a Lakers’ game. Frustrated with slow-moving traffic, which I identified with last week, the lawyer turns off onto a side street. But the area quickly grows deserted and darker. Then he hears the dreaded noise in the engine; it cuts out and he is stranded, stuck in his expensive car in one of those places ruled by guns and thugs. He manages to phone for a tow truck, but before it arrives, five young hoodlums surround his vehicle looking to cause him serious problems. Just then the tow truck driver shows up and its driver, an earnest, pleasant man, begins to hook up the disabled car. The thugs protest – they’ve got dibs here, this is their customer. The tow truck driver takes the leader of the group aside and speaks a little prophecy to him. “Man,” he says, “the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.” It is prophecy. But that tow truck driver wasn’t the first one to speak it, of course; that would have been somebody like Habakkuk. For that driver, the fact that things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be – that streets are ruled by guns and cities by violence, that government influence is sold to the highest bidders and the poor lose their voice, that sin is rewarded and righteousness comes at a price – it is not just something that gets in the way of his job, it’s not just something that he is sadly resigned to, it is a situation that must be changed, starting with him speaking a good word on behalf of humanity.

For Habakkuk, the fact that things aren't the way they're supposed to be and he can't see them changing is a burden that weighs on his soul. Habakkuk knows 2 things in his heart: he knows that God is on a mission of life and peace in this world, and he knows that the world is nothing like it's supposed to be. Such an awareness makes this little book in the First Testament one of the most applicable to our times. When we have just lived through the hottest July in recorded history, when wildfires again will set a new record for the most acreage wiped out, as COVID resurges once more and our county's positivity rates fill up hospital beds, as the 3rd day of in person classes resume in Albuquerque a new round of school shootings erupt, as Afghanistan appears to be crumbling to Taliban rule once more, the words of this prophet, "How long, O Lord, will you allow wrong to have its way in your world?" His challenge, his burden, as James VanTholen notes, is to determine how the plan of God and the terrible brokenness of the world can go on at the same time; how, in God's world, can things remain so far from what they're supposed to be? And the answer he receives doesn't do much to clear up his confusion. The prophet implies that God's baffling answer will be restoration even with the onslaught of the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, upon Judah. It is an ugly thing that will happen, but there will be Someone at work through it all, bringing a plan into fulfillment. God will work God's purpose out despite the struggles and suffering being experienced.

J.D. Eppinga once told a story of a dream he had. In the dream, he is led around town by a guide, an angel. They enter a church of immense beauty. As they take in its grandeur, a painter walks by wearing a button which says, "Quiet! Genius at work." The man places a ladder alongside one of the beautiful wooden pillars and slops paint on it. Eppinga is stunned – the beauty of the place will be ruined. They leave and on the sidewalk, they come to an artist working on a scene of the town. They look over her shoulder while she works. She is wearing a button which says, "Quiet! Genius at work." But what she is painting makes no sense, and the smell is strong and unappealing. Still, at the guide's encouragement, they decide to stay and eat in an outdoor diner next to the working artist. To Eppinga's surprise, the meal is excellent, one of the best he's ever had. Back on the sidewalk, they take a second look at the artist's work. She is almost finished and this time, he is stunned by its beauty. It says more about the town than any words could express. They return to the cathedral, where the pillars are now a

rich black and it is glorious. He is drawn to worship in that space. But he wants to know about the button, “Quiet! Genius at work.” “Oh, that?” says the guide, “That is Psalm 37:7 “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently before your God.” That is the answer that Habakkuk receives as well. There is nothing pretty about the violence of the Babylonians. The suffering they will produce will be felt for centuries. But there is Someone at work, and there is a plan in mind that will prevail.

In the Museum of Modern Art, there is a painting that revolutionized the art industry of its time. Critics called it reckless, messy, with excess paint appearing haphazard causing ripples on the canvas condemned as childish. It fits well on display in New York’s MOMA rather than Paris’ The Louvre because of its radical and modern shift in style. As Mikayla and I stood gazing at Van Gogh’s “Starry Night,” I questioned how anyone could call it childish? I was pulled into its beauty, motion, color, and depth as it instantly became one of my all-time favorite paintings. To see it at its beginning must have troubled onlookers, must have led them down a rabbit hole of unanswerable questions, but now it is a timeless masterpiece. Every one of us looks around and sees – in our society, our families, our health, our church, our hearts – things different from the way they’re supposed to be. But we know the Grand Artist of this place; we are children of this Creator. We can trust the Genius at Work to create a masterpiece with our future. And then we can still rejoice in the Lord, even here, even now, for it is well with our souls.