

City of God, City of Man
Habakkuk 3:1 – 16
Fairview Presbyterian Church
October 2, 2016
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How is God at work in the world? 3:3 - 4

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. ⁴ His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power.

If you have had conversation with people who are religious skeptics, unbelievers; it is likely that you have heard them ask, “*If God is good, why is there evil in the world?*” This is known as the problem of evil. It is clear that the world is not what it should be. Why is that? What would a good God permit so much pain, heartache, sin, disappointment, suffering and evil in the world he has made?

One thing to note is that modern skeptics **were not** the first to raise this question. The problem of good and evil presumes the existence of God. It is the belief that God has created the world that makes the question of the reality of evil so pressing. The prophet Habakkuk understands this dilemma. He begins his book with a complaint. He writes 1:3 – 4):

- ² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
- ³ Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
- ⁴ So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.

Habakkuk’s message is very timely. Habakkuk questions God. He asks, “Why God do you permit violence and injustice in the world?” The world is unfair. It is unjust. “Why do you permit it to be so, God?”

God replies to Habakkuk in two parts.

First, shockingly, God tells Habakkuk that he – God – is raising up the violent nation of Babylon (1:5 – 11). Part of the story of world history is the story

of the Babylonian Empire. God's message to Habakkuk is that the ascendancy of Babylon on the world stage of history is part of God's work and purpose.

Secondly, God gives to Habakkuk a message (2:4): "*just shall live by faith.*" God's people approach life in this world, not based upon their ability to see and comprehend all that God is doing, but rather trusting that he is in control, *even* in the midst of the injustice, uncertainties and unexpectedness of life. God is at work as his people walk by faith *and* in the realities of history unfolding around us. Put differently, Habakkuk tells us that God is at work through his covenant people *and* through pagan nations like Babylon. God speaks his message to his covenant people *through* prophets like Habakkuk. And, God works his purposes in the world, even through the actions of pagan, unbelieving nations, such as the Babylonians. *Both* the prophet and the pagan nation represent the unfolding of God's will.

In saying that God works through the actions of the Babylonians, that is not to be understood as an endorsement or blessing upon all the actions of the Babylonians. Saying that God is at work in Babylon is *not* to say that God endorses all that is done by Babylon.

The book of Habakkuk is only three chapters long. In the first two chapters Habakkuk raises his complaint regarding the reality of injustice and Habakkuk receives God's response to the complaint. Chapter three is a prayer by Habakkuk that reflects the spiritual lessons Habakkuk has learned from God. The first thing Habakkuk learns is that God works in the world through two kingdoms: The City of God and the City of Man.

God works in the world through two kingdoms: the City of God and the City of Man. 3:6 - 7

His were the everlasting ways. ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

Habakkuk's poem moves from God's everlasting ways to the tents of Cushan...and the curtains...of Midian." Habakkuk focuses upon both the reality of eternity and the realities of life on earth. We live life in between. Each week, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." We live on earth, with our eyes on heaven. Throughout church history the people of God have made a distinction between the city of God and the city of man. When asked about the paying of taxes, Jesus replied, "*give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*" In the earliest days of the church, Christ's people were subject to persecution by pagan Roman authorities, in large part because of their refusal to declare Caesar as "Lord." The early Christians sought to be good citizens, but they would not give Caesar absolute authority, arguing that such authority belonged to God alone.

Things changed dramatically with the conversion of the emperor Constantine. Christianity became the official, endorsed religion of the empire. After Constantine's conversion, confusion arose in the understanding of the city of God and the city of man. Some mistakenly began to believe that the identity of the church was tied, connected, to the success of the state: mistakenly believing that the fortunes of Rome were the same as those of the church.

The theologian, Augustine, was among the first to try to sort things out. He lived during the time of the decline of Rome. Augustine asked, "*Would the destruction of Rome – the city of man – mean also the destruction of the church – the city of God?*" Augustine was unambiguous in reaffirming and making clear the distinction between the two kingdoms.

However, this confusion would arise repeatedly in the story of European history. The two kingdoms were again confused in the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne. In England the confusion continued when Henry VIII was both king *and* head of the church. In Europe there were "established" churches representing the official religion of the nation state.

The founding of America brought an important correction to these trends. The first amendment to the United States Constitution declares, "*Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion.*" Unlike the nations of Europe in general and England in particular, there is to be no *established church*, no official state church in America. The United States *disestablished* the church. The United States declared that the state is not in the religion business.

In general, Protestant theologians consider this development a good thing, a return to the way things ought to be. A distinction needs to be maintained between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. We should not confuse the spheres. There is no such thing as a *Christian* political party. Political parties represent the kingdom of man.

The division between the kingdoms is not absolute. There is some overlap. Every Christian is also a citizen of his or her nation, owing to the state the legitimate duties of citizenship. Likewise, the church has an interest in the wider culture. The church legitimately speaks to the world on certain matters of importance, such as can be seen in the debates in our day over the sanctity of human life and the understanding of the nature and meaning of marriage. However, it is important to maintain the distinctions between God and the state. There are two spheres. They are separate spheres of authority. The areas of life where they overlap are limited.

The modern world, as a rule, is not particularly good at thinking clearly about these matters, of keeping the distinctions between the spheres of life separate. This modern confusion is seen clearly, for example, in the matter of celebrity endorsements. This past week I bought Bruce Springsteen's

autobiography. (I will read it this coming week!) He sets my New Jersey soul a flutter. Nevertheless, I do not look to “The Boss” for guidance regarding whom I will vote for in the upcoming elections.

The message of the Book of Habakkuk is that there are two kingdoms, two spheres. It is important to keep each separate. From this fact our next point logically follows: that God is at work through both church and state, through special grace and common grace.

God is at work through church and state, special grace and common grace.

² O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

In the book of Habakkuk, we see God’s hand revealed both in the work and the message of the prophet, Habakkuk, *and* in the work and actions of the pagan state of Babylon. God is at work in and through both spheres. God also works differently in and through both spheres. It is important to keep our understanding of the work of each sphere separate.

Theologians speak of the spheres of common grace and special grace. Common grace refers to the normal ways in which God is at work in the world. Common graces are those blessings God gives to all people regardless of whether they know or acknowledge or give thanks to God. God brings the rain upon believers and unbelievers. Marriage is a common grace, given to all people throughout the world. Government is a common grace. Business is a common grace. Science and philosophy are common graces.

On the other hand, there are special graces given to God’s people. The sacraments, baptism and communion, are special graces. They are not given to everyone, but only to those in church. Scripture, together with the wisdom and knowledge it teaches, are not given to the world, but to God’s people. We are the ones who look to the Bible for guidance and understanding. It is in the sphere of the church where the message of Christ and the promise of salvation is heard and received. The message of salvation in Christ is a special grace.

What the prophet Habakkuk teaches is that God works through the ministries of those who are his agents for special graces: prophets, priests, preachers and pastors. And, God works through the common ministries of ordinary life: farmers, financial planners, plumbers and politicians.

Remember, the spheres must be kept generally separate. It is the job of government to govern. It is wrong for the state to promise salvation through its efforts. The kingdom of God will not be ushered in by a political party. We do not build the kingdom of God through the efforts of man. Nations rise and fall. Politicians are elected and defeated. We will not bring the kingdom of God through political victory, nor do we lose it by political defeat. The promise of

salvation belongs to the sphere of the church, not to government. Beware if a government or politician promises a golden age or utopia. Human causes are always marred by sin. No government will ever be perfect. There is no area of life not affected by sin. This is the message of the Christian doctrine of total depravity. It is impossible to find salvation in the victory of a political party. At the same time, because God has established the nations of the earth, we believe that God is at work in the common graces of life. God works through the working of our political system, through good laws justly applied, and through the faithful efforts of men and women in their respective occupations, the arts, sciences and education – all those things that make our lives what they are.

The spheres must be kept separate. This is why the church should not endorse political parties or candidates. Political winds change. The message of the gospel does not. The offer of salvation belongs to the sphere of the church. The church specializes in revealed, unchanging truth. It is wrong for the church to speak on issues where it has no competency. The church has no particular expertise, and therefore no special authority, on questions such as global warming, hybrid cars, or the designated hitter rule. Not everything important in temporal life is addressed in scripture. I think that the American experiment in republican democracy is a good way to govern a nation. I like the way America is organized. However, in saying this, I am simply expressing my personal opinion on these matters. There is no specific Biblical mandate that says this is how a nation ought to be organized. It is important to keep clear the distinctions between amazing grace and common grace. The church's job is to be the church. We teach the Bible. We proclaim the message of Christ. We are in the religion business. We declare that God is at work through the saving grace of Christ. In the things revealed in scripture, the church has expertise and authority.

The church has authority to speak with conviction as to God's purposes in salvation in Jesus Christ. At the present time, while we confess that God is in control of history, we also confess that his purposes remain hidden.

God is in control of history, though his purposes are hidden.

⁶ He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations;

The imagery Habakkuk uses of God *measuring* the earth is a metaphor for God's authority and control over it. To measure something means you have power over it, to shape and make it what it will be. Habakkuk tells us that God measures the earth and shakes the nations. They are under his divine hand. It is God who raises up nations and brings them down. It is God who oversees the rise and fall of political leaders. This is not to say that everything a nation or president does is automatically right and blessed by God. Nations, presidents, congress, judges, police officers, generals – all those in authority – may act with wisdom or foolishness.

God has given the *power of the sword* to human governments. The apostle Paul writes in the opening verses of Romans 13.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.

Possessing the power of the sword, governing nations can impose punishment upon wrong doers. Governing powers can declare war. It is their right and authority. Governing authorities may be wise or foolish and, whether wise or foolish, they exercise authority that has been entrusted to them by God.

In Matthew 28, as the Lord Christ is about to ascend into heaven, he tells us, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" This is the preface to **The Great Commission**. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ, both the heavenly authority of grace and the kingdom of earthly power is his. He is Lord of all. At the same time, his earthly kingship is hidden at present. God is at work in our midst. However, his work is often befuddling to us. What God is doing in history at this time is not revealed to us. We walk by faith, not by sight. God is in control. Trusting in his controlling purpose is part of the walk of faith. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and ultimately all that unfolds will be tied up and caught up in him.

Practically, what this means in the meantime, is that each of us must be about the business and calling God has given to us. Housewife, student, lawyer, construction worker, city planner, executive chef, DJ, or store clerk: whatever you do, do it well and faithfully to the honor and glory of God. The relationships you are privileged to have – parent, child, husband, wife, brother, sister, neighbor, friend – cultivate and nourish them to the honor and glory God. Whatever challenges you face in life – work, health, community, personal, environment, lift them up to the throne of grace asking God to intervene and be at work through them, trusting in his loving care.

We do not know what tomorrow holds. That knowledge is hidden in the decreative will of God. God's ways and purposes in human history and temporal life are, for the most part, hidden from us. Yet this does not leave us without hope. God has revealed what we most need to know: God saves those who are his.

God saves those who are his.

¹³ You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed.

The broad sweep of Habakkuk's prayer is a tumbling rush of images and metaphors drawn from Israel's history reaffirming God's authority over the cosmos and over history, together with the expectation and promise that God will one day preside over a final judgment. Habakkuk's words in this prayer have an eschatological flare to them. God has told Habakkuk that he, God, is raising up the Babylonians. Habakkuk cannot understand the why and wherefore, but in his prayer he trusts that one-day God will straighten things out as they should be. The hope of God's people is not based on how history unfolds.

Rather, in v. 13, Habakkuk reaffirms what is our hope in God, the salvation of God's people through the work of the Messiah. The *anointed* one referred to in this verse is the Messiah. The word *Messiah* is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word for anointed one. Translating the word into Greek gives us the word "Christos." Jesus Christ is God's anointed one, the Messiah. The Messiah, the anointed one, Habakkuk tells us, will bring salvation to God's people. We may not be sure what God is doing in our world. However, we can be sure of God's purpose in our lives. He brings salvation to those who are his.

There is one last observation that should be made before we close. Habakkuk's prayer teaches that the temporal authority of kings, presidents and nations is not absolute. God will one-day judge.

Temporal authority is not absolute, God will one day judge.

⁹ You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows.

The image in v. 9 is one of several in the prayer that suggest God's coming judgment upon the nations of the world. Habakkuk sees God unsheathing his bow, a weapon of war, and calling for many arrows to unleash his wrath upon an unjust world. God will raise up and bring down nations and political parties, but in this life, God's judgment upon rulers is not yet evident. The image of a promised judgment is a promise at the end of time, when God draws the curtain, and time is no more. One day, all will be called to account.

This idea of a final accounting, a final judgment, is an important concept, with very practical implications for the here and now. The expectation of judgment says to a nation's leaders, to the men and women of power in our world, that your authority is not absolute. There are limits to what you can and ought to do. It is in your own eternal interests to remember that one day you will give God an answer as to how you carried yourself and exercised the authority entrusted to you in this world. When Jesus stands before the Roman governor Pilate, Pilate asks Jesus, "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." Jesus' words remind Pilate that ultimately Pilate is responsible for how he exercises his authority. Moreover, Jesus' words indicate that there are levels of responsibility at work. Those who delivered Jesus into

Pilate's hands – that is a reference to the Jewish Sanhedrin – bear a greater sin than Pilate does.

It is the tendency of every government to accrue to itself greater power and to wish to claim absolute authority. One important facet of Habakkuk's prayer is to make clear that governments are ultimately answerable to God. Their authority is not absolute. The church declares that there is a limit to the world's power. During World War II, Joseph Stalin famously asked, "*How many divisions does the Pope have?*" Of course, the Pope did not need divisions. His authority is of a different nature. And while no one could have foreseen it at the time Stalin spoke, God has passed his verdict upon the legacy of communism in general, and of Stalin and the Soviet Union in particular. Stalin and the Soviet Union are no more: and there is still a Pope in Rome. As the prophet Habakkuk said, "God has shaken the nation."

The nations and rulers of the world need to be reminded that whatever authority they exercise, they hold it as stewards. It is entrusted to them by God. And one day to God they will give account. Happily, there have been a few kings and rulers through the centuries who have understood this truth. Do you know the story of King Canute? He was a Danish king who ruled England from 994 A.D. until 1035 A.D. Like most kings, those who served him regularly would speak of his greatness, power and invincibility. Canute tired of the messages of the sycophants. He ordered his throne set down at the seashore and he commanded the waves not to come in and wet him. Nonetheless, the waves kept coming, showing the futility of human commands over nature. King Canute never wore his crown again. He had it hung upon a statue of the crucified Christ – precisely where it belonged.

Close

Where is your hope this day? We are in the midst of an election cycle. To be president of the United States is to possess a very powerful office. America remains the strongest, most influential, and wealthiest nation in the world. But America's authority is not absolute. A president's authority is not the highest. Whoever wins the election in November, they are nonetheless answerable to Jesus Christ, to whom "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given." And that is an encouraging thought. I am calling you to place your faith in Christ today – and not in political parties, left or right. Trust in Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Say "Amen" Somebody.

Habakkuk's Prayer

3 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

- 2 O LORD, I have heard the report of you,
and your work, O LORD, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it;
in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath remember mercy.
- 3 God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His splendor covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise. *Selah*
- 4 His brightness was like the light;
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
- 5 Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels.
- 6 He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered;
the everlasting hills sank low.
His were the everlasting ways.
- 7 I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction;
the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.
- 8 Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?
Was your anger against the rivers,
or your indignation against the sea,
when you rode on your horses,
on your chariot of salvation?
- 9 You stripped the sheath from your bow,
calling for many arrows. *Selah*
You split the earth with rivers.
- 10 The mountains saw you and writhed;
the raging waters swept on;
the deep gave forth its voice;
it lifted its hands on high.
- 11 The sun and moon stood still in their place
at the light of your arrows as they sped,
at the flash of your glittering spear.
- 12 You marched through the earth in fury;
you threshed the nations in anger.
- 13 You went out for the salvation of your people,
for the salvation of your anointed.
You crushed the head of the house of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck. *Selah*
- 14 You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors,

who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.
15 You trampled the sea with your horses,
the surging of mighty waters.
16 I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me.
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.