
“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? … Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? … Justice never prevails.”+++ Habakkuk’s haunting words read like the Psalms of lament – giving voice to despair, to frustration that any notion of cosmic justice appears to be impotent in the face of suffering – especially the unrelenting suffering of the righteous.+++ Habakkuk is unlike the other prophets, who either lash out against Israel for its disobedience, or against the Israel’s enemies for bringing violence and death to her borders. Habakkuk is lashing out at God for the corruption of his nation:: “Why do the righteous suffer at the hands of the powerful? How can all the violence, injustice, difficulties, and evil in the world possibly serve God’s purposes?”+++ The prophet is resolute in his complaint, demanding a divine response:: He says “I’m going to sit right here at my watchpost and wait for an answer – no matter how long it takes”… And that’s exactly what he does.

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We can all relate to Habakkuk’s complaints, can’t we? Our blood boils when we watch the news each night – Whichever side of the political spectrum we are on, – we cry foul over and over again. How can anyone see what’s going on and not despair at the state of our world? But it’s not just politics, not by a long shot… we live in a time of powerful oligarchs, with the money and resources to do whatever they want. We live in a time when parents have to decide between rent and groceries for their families –||| when, after a lifetime of work and service – a lifetime of prayer – seniors find themselves with insufficient income to keep a roof over their own heads.|||+++ And so, with Habakkuk we cry, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?” …+++ +++ These prophets – I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again – it seems like they had time machines to have described our own world so clearly.+++ +++ And it’s not just our time – it’s all times:: >>> And that includes first-century Palestine. The Jews faced a perfect storm: Roman rule that was more interested in silencing dissent than providing justice; religious authorities who would do anything to hold onto whatever power they had left; and a class of wealthy elite – collaborators with Rome who cheated their own impoverished people:: Wealthy elite like the tax collectors, for example – people like Zacchaeus.+++ So, Habakkuk’s complaints against injustice could just as easily have come from the people of Jericho… that day when Jesus came to town. They had asked God for an answer, too… Asked God for relief from their own suffering. And, like Habakkuk at his watchpost, they had been waiting a long time. Faithfully waiting for the Lord to respond – … and now… finally… from all they had heard about him… this Jesus seemed to be the answer they had been waiting for. It’s no wonder such crowds gathered as he passed through the city – they wanted to see the one they had waited for – the one who may just be the Messiah.+++ So – you can understand their reaction – when Jesus stops under a tree – looks up – and invites himself over for dinner with…::: Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus??!!? Are you kidding me??+++ The rich chief tax collector?? – The collaborator with Rome?? The traitor to his own people??+++ No wonder they grumble. “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”+++ How can they make sense of that?? How does it fit??+++ +++ How can it possibly serve God’s purposes – to reward that guy – by honoring him to share a meal with Christ??+++ “Score another victory for the wealthy elite, Jesus is eating with a sinner”…

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Grumbling about Jesus… Who else complained about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them?: The Pharisees! Jesus gets the same complaint from opposite directions::: “Jesus, you shouldn’t hang out with people like that! You should be more like me – and that means hating the same people I hate.”+++ Grumbling about Jesus – grumbling, really, that his compassion is too big when he shares it with “sinners” – his love too boundless – his grace too free.+++ Whenever anyone can’t understand that the Good Shepherd was here to save everyone – even when it means leaving the 99 sheep of the herd to go and look for the one that is lost. When they don’t understand that – they grumble. They all just react in the moment – to the one thing they see Christ do – the one thing they hear him say. Is it what they wanted and expected him to do and say? How does it affect them??+++ What are they all missing? What’s the bigger picture unfolding, right before their eyes, and they are too shortsighted to see it?

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Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, November 3, 2019.
Well… to look for an answer, let’s go back to chapter 9 – to a passage we talked about all the way back on June 30:: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Everything we’ve talked about since the beginning of July has been while Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem: Village by village, crowd by crowd, step by dusty step. Christ has been on his way to his own crucifixion – his face set to Jerusalem – where he will save the world. +++ +++ And that brings us to Jericho. This is the last stop – and Jesus is just passing through. After Jericho, the next passage is Palm Sunday. The end of the road. +++ +++ So let’s look a little more closely at what happens in Jericho. First of all, it’s one of the most visually described narratives of the gospels. We can actually see the people on the dusty streets of Jericho. Then we see this short, rich, man in his brightly colored robes, jumping up and down trying to see Jesus, but he can’t – so he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree. +++ +++ Could the scene be any more absurd? I think that’s why it has become a favorite for children – it is almost silly. This sophisticated, damaged, man is reduced to childlike gushing, overcome with eagerness to see Jesus, leaving his pride down at the bottom of that tree. Zacchaeus shows us that when you truly encounter Jesus, at some point, you just have to shed all the norms and conventions of society – stop being who you’ve always been, and become someone new … ||| leave it all behind. +++ With all these details – a scene that verges on comedy – Luke makes sure we don’t see Zacchaeus as some kind of stereotype:: as some anonymous tax collector – just another sinner that need forgiveness. Zacchaeus is a real person – a person who has had disappointments in life, hopes, and dreams. He’s made some bad choices and now, today, in the presence of Christ, he repents of them all. Zacchaeus is so real – we can relate to him – he could be any one of us. +++ +++ And he hasn’t planned to say a word to Jesus – he just wants to see what all the fuss was about. I can imagine, in his position… he’s heard all the buzz, the excitement, as Jesus approaches the town, but nobody would really talk to him about it – nobody would explain to him about Jesus’ message – his miracles – the hope he offered. Because, frankly, Zacchaeus is one of the people they want to be rescued from.

So Zacchaeus scurries up the tree to see Jesus – not an act of faith, but so far just curiosity. And, what happens next? +++ Jesus stops – … and looks up into the tree. +++ +++ On his way to save all of humanity – …to save the world…… Jesus stops… for this one… man – this admitted sinner. ||| +++ Because that’s what Jesus came to do: he tells us right in this passage: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” ||| +++ +++ I envision a moment of silence then… – a hush… – as everyone’s expectations come into focus. The people expected Jesus to judge Zacchaeus: “Woe be unto you, sinner!” ((The same kind of judgment our world expects to hear from the church – an expectation we fulfill all too often.)) +++ ||| But that’s not what Jesus does. He stops and gives this one sinner his undivided attention – he gives him his grace. And Jesus doesn’t ask: he tells: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” And Zacchaeus does just that – he “hurries down from the tree and was happy to welcome him.” +++ It’s what we in the Reformed/Calvinist tradition call “Irresistible Grace:” The grace of Christ that is so powerful – so wonderful – so compelling – and often so unexpected – that it takes us over… and it brings us to new life. That’s what Christ brings to Zacchaeus and to Jericho. By stopping to have a meal with a sinner, Jesus forever changes the life of this man – who in turn changes the character of the community, repaying all the damage he has done, putting money back into the pockets of the people, and giving to the poor.

Looking back at the concluding verses of our reading in Habakkuk, the kind of grace that Christ is offering is exactly what the prophet promises will happen – not immediately: “if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.” The Lord will answer the complaint about tyranny and injustice – will answer our pleading in the face of suffering – but not necessarily how or when the Old Testament reader – or we – might expect – not how anyone expects. +++ Christ responds by traveling to Jerusalem… and turning the world upside down as he goes – sinner by town – town by town. The oligarchs of the time will have a chance to open their eyes and repent, just as Zacchaeus does. The poor and disenfranchised will have every reason to have hope – even to celebrate. The answer is right there in Habakkuk – “the righteous live by their faith.” +++ Life will not always make sense – there will be times when you just can’t see the benefit of faithfulness – or the significance of a lifetime of prayer. There will be times when the unjust get all the breaks. +++ “If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.”
Last week, we talked about the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Remember? The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” while the tax collector cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I think as Zacchaeus makes his way through the crowd – as he desperately climbs the tree – as he catches his first glimpse of Jesus – he was feeling a lot like that other tax collector. “Who am I that Christ should ever look favorably upon me. What have I done, amid all my shortcomings, that makes me worthy to even hear his words?”+++ It’s a good question – a question for all of us, sinners that we are – a question to ponder as we stumble along looking for a sycamore tree of our own to climb… And it’s a question that gets at the heart of today’s lesson. +++ What makes you worthy of receiving the grace of Christ? +++ The GOOD NEWS is – Christ himself makes you worthy. He went to Jerusalem and confronted the cross to make you worthy. And today, in this place, he Makes a Stop on the Way to Jerusalem – to invite YOU to have a meal with him – a meal that will change you, and, like Zacchaeus – it’s a meal that strengthens you to go and change the world – with the same lavish love, grace, and forgiveness you have so freely received. ++++++ Whoever you are… Whatever you’ve done… Christ stops this morning under your tree, … and looks up.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.