

“Fortress of Faith”

**Sermon preached by Reverend Carmen Garrigan
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Text: Habakkuk 3:1-19**

Prayer: Gracious God, You are the Mighty One. We know that the greatness and splendor of who You are is too much for us to comprehend. Yet we long to know You more. As we hear your word this morning we pray that You would reveal more of Yourself to us. Write Your Word upon our hearts and glue songs of praise to our lips so that we would honor You rightly. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

I remember the conversations I had with one of my friends, who was preparing to leave for a missionary position in Kazakhstan, right after his graduation from Princeton Seminary. He was going to teach Church history at a small fledgling seminary in a remote part of Asia. He commented that to most people, teaching church history in outer-Mongolia may sound like the most boring thing a person could commit to doing. But he couldn’t be happier as he knew he had joy-filled news to share to new Christians who were in deep need of a strong foundation for their growing church. To these new believers each church conflict seemed insurmountable for their own spiritual struggles seemed too weighty to move forward in faith. My friend Mike, however, knew that church history wasn’t some waste of time, dull edicts from the past, but a wealth of inspiration for believers for today.

As Christians trying to follow Christ faithfully today, one of our greatest resources to bolster our hope is the deep archive of Church history. When we know of the Lord’s fame from His actions in times past, we are better prepared to be hopeful for how God will make Himself known in our day. Habakkuk seemed to know something profound about this principle given his prayer we read today.

If you have been following along with this sermon series for the past two weeks you know that Habakkuk has been calling out to God in his distress. Habakkuk laments, “How can a holy God look upon the evil that pervades the earth?” And, “Why must the righteous endure hardship when the wicked seem to get off free?” The Lord answers Habakkuk, reminding him that the righteous must live by faith. And while it may seem as if evil is currently prevailing, God will ultimately rule the earth in perfect justice.

In our passage today, Habakkuk opened his prayer by acclaiming the awesomeness of what God has done in the past.

“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” Recalling in his mind what God had done and had promised to accomplish in the future was enough to make his heart pound and

his whole body tremble. And it gave him hope to wait upon the Lord for the day when justice will be wrought. While he waits in a desolate land for God to renew His mighty deeds from the past, Habakkuk chooses to praise God even when there is no new news to proclaim.

While this small little book of Habakkuk may not answer every question we have about God setting things right and destroying evil, it does give us an excellent model for what to do while we await the coming of God's perfect justice and deliverance. The first course of action is to contemplate and share with great intensity who God is and what He has done on behalf of His people.

Think about sharing what God has done in the same way that you would describe your favorite sports star to a child. You would likely begin by listing their stats and abilities; how they are stronger, smarter, or faster than all their peers. You would then continue with all of their historic plays and feats, just as if you were writing their memorial plaques for the Hall of Fame. The room would fill with the intensity of your voice and your young pupil would have more than a few drops of saliva splattered on his clothing. This is the kind of remembering and proclaiming we are called to do as we speak of God's awesomeness from one generation to the next.

After Habakkuk's vision of God's mighty deeds, his whole body was shaken by the experience. Usually we only give God's saving acts a mere passing thought. "Oh, He saved the Israelites by splitting the Red Sea." Isn't that nice. "And then He caused a virgin to give birth to a child who would become our Savior." Happy day.

Rather, the history of God acting on behalf of His people should cause deep anticipation, much as if we are waiting to see our team make the winning play in a game tied in overtime. In such circumstances we either grip our seat with excitement or scream at the top of our lungs. Rarely do intense fans just shrug such feats off with a ho-hum attitude.

Our scripture passage today calls the Lord the Famous One, whose deeds are worthy of awe. Often, the saving acts of God are met with mediocre enthusiasm in my own heart because of their familiarity to me. Yet I so want them to be my source of praise.

Some of the best memories I have of being enraptured by God's movement in the life of the church are from my church history classes in Princeton, taught by Dr. Demming. Dr. Demming was properly enthusiastic about church history! He would always bring a large stack of notes to class and place them on the podium. Yet he didn't touch them the entire lecture. Instead he would pace briskly back and forth on whatever raised area happened to be available. He would recite the details of religious wars and creedal formulations with such animation that I could hardly wait to hear how they got worked out. I remember the one day he was talking about the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper and the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper and how they seemed to conflict. Would the churches still be in communion? Would nations go to war? Would I have to disavow those times I had partaken in the Lord Supper at my Lutheran friend's church? I was riveted. Alas, good news to calm my racing concerns. The Heidelberg Catechism was written to bridge the seemingly impossible doctrinal divide.

The other times pondering God's mighty acts have caused me such passionate emotion that usually involve remembering how He has worked out His plans in my life. Whether it is remembering by name the people He put in my life who showed me Christ's love or how He called me into ordained ministry, I am overwhelmed with gratitude that God should give such thought to the details of my life. When I look at God's hand working out His perfect purposes in my life, it is whole body experience. My eyes see my journal entries, my heart is overcome with joy, my voice is raised in thanksgiving. My entire being understands the goodness of God.

If only this were always the case. Often instead of recalling the many things I know God has done for His people and for me in particular I fall into a "what have you done for me lately" style groaning. I know God has the power to act and I long for Him to do so again. So I pray, "come soon." And meanwhile "give me a sign to prove you will act quickly." Habakkuk reminds me that asking God to renew such acts is a beneficial prayer, but it shouldn't get in the way of thanking God regardless of when He chooses to act. After all, His timing is better than I could hope for or imagine.

So while I wait for God to renew His mighty works on His timetable, I'll also anticipate the arrival of my Christian History and Biography magazine so that I can become aware of more reasons why I worship a famous God who has done great things.

Knowing how God has worked for the good of His people throughout the course of history and being keenly aware of how God has shaped the course of your life is the key to a strong hope in God and for His actions in the future.

However, the more difficult step, but one that can be carried out with just as much passion, is rejoicing in the Lord while we wait for Him to act. This is the true test of living by faith. It is challenging for our hearts to echo Habakkuk's prayer:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Most often when things aren't going as we like we choose to blame God, let alone take time to rejoice in Him. This in-between time we've experienced as we've awaited the outcome of the PNC's labors has had its ups and downs for most of us. Yet I have so appreciated the attitude of the PNC throughout the entire process. They have always had a reason to praise God even if they hadn't received the outcome of their principal prayer request. And while we now have even more reasons to praise God for His working on our behalf, we still have some waiting and rejoicing to do as God finalizes the details and brings His plan into fruition.

Habakkuk's closing commitment to praise contains similar words to those that Mary used in her prayer of thanksgiving after receiving the news that she was to be the mother of the Messiah.

They came from her lips when she went to visit her relative Elizabeth who was also expecting a baby. Her boy would grow into John the Baptist.

Think what a gift from God these words of worship are to Mary as she still had plenty of waiting to do. She praises God in a profound way even though there are a lot of details to be worked out in her life. Mary still didn't know how her husband to be, Joseph, would take the news. How would her parents react? And to be the mother of God's own Son! That is a pretty hefty responsibility. I wonder if she ever doubted that she could raise Jesus in a way that honored God and prepared him for God's purpose. She had a lot of waiting to do before she would discover how these particulars would unfold. Even still, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed because "she has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:45).

Similarly, Paul finds his strength through praising God while in prison. His admonishment to the church in Philippi that we read earlier about rejoicing in the Lord wasn't written during a Hawaiian vacation when circumstances were perfect. They were the words chosen to encourage others to pray with thanksgiving regardless of their circumstances.

When Habakkuk brings the reality of his situation before God, yet still musters a song of praise, he was strengthened for the tough journey ahead of him. He declares: The Sovereign LORD is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to go on the heights.

Watching deer that seem to effortlessly bound up the side of the mountain is quite a sight, as is seeing them making their way securely across a narrow rocky pass. While the terrain they cross daily may seem treacherous to us, they are well equipped for the task. Committing to praise God in the midst of uncertainty can be our source of strength when the road ahead of us seems more rugged than smooth and more discouraging than inviting.

Habakkuk was waiting for justice to come to those who had desolated his nation, the chosen people of God. Mary had the unthinkable future of raising God's own Son. Paul was uncertain whether he would soon be executed and with Christ or released from prison and allowed to continue His ministry in service to Christ. For what are you waiting upon God?

While you wait, do you long for a secure fortress of faith that will outlast the onslaught of life's enduring questions and carry you through woes of our earthly life? If so, come; let us take shelter in the place that our God, the Famous One, has given. We will remember with passionate intensity His saving works for His people throughout history and for us. And while all other provisions seem to run dry, our declaration of praise will be our strength as we wait upon the Lord to renew His marvelous deeds in our day.