

Series: "Corona...Corona"

Sermon: "Are You Sure, God?"

Text: Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

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- Good morning if you are here or connected with us now, good afternoon, good evening if you are elsewhere and listening at a different time!
- For a few weeks as we find ourselves still transitioning back to meeting together, we are considering the relevant words of Scripture recorded by an old friend of mine named "*Habakkuk*." We'll get back to "*Genesis*" relatively soon, Lord willing.
- But, meanwhile, I call Habakkuk an "old friend," even though I have never met him personally, because years ago he taught me that God might actually be smarter than me. He has also been there faithfully to remind me of that possibility subsequent times in my life when I have needed to hear that truth again. It's a truth I seem to forget from time to time. ***God is smarter than me!***
- I recognize that no self-respecting, Bible-believing, conservative Evangelical Christian would ever say out loud, "***I am smarter than God!***" But, many of us, even though we would never say it, *think* it ***and live*** it as if we are smarter than God than at figuring out how things should work in our lives.
- *You with me on this?* If you are, please shake your masked-faces up and down. If not, at least your mask will hide your expression of disgust for the low spiritual intelligence of the rest of us shaking our heads up and down.
- I couldn't find a higher resolution copy of this cartoon. It is pretty fuzzy so I'll need to describe it. God, with a sad face and an angel with a clipboard standing next to him are looking over the edge of heaven to a scene of natural destruction on earth. Observing the mess on earth, the angel asks God: "*Have you ever considered revising your plan?*" I called this sermon "*Are You Sure, God?*" But I

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almost stole that line for the title: *"Have You Ever Considered Revising Your Plan, God?"*

- That is a pretty bold way to put questioning how God is doing things in words. We often put our doubts about his plan in choices and actions. This can be more subtle and provide for plausible deniability when we are confronted with the truth that we really do believe we could do a better job at being God than God does.
- We picked-up this bold thinking from our parents—not our birth parents although they most likely reinforced the idea at times. WE caught it from our very first "parents" who said, *"God, we think we will live life this way rather than the way you told us would be life-giving."*
- *"God, we will look for life where we think we can find it even though you have told us that we will only find it in you. We will trust ourselves—our feelings, our appetites, our felt needs—because, in the immediacy that becomes so important for we who live relatively short lengths of time—getting what we think we need and what we want right now is "smarter" than waiting for what you said is truth.*
- Why does God ask us to pause and know his truth when we are in trouble? Because the urgency of what we feel we need in those times will easily delude us into thinking we are smarter than God.
- *"Here is a problem that threatens me! I am in trouble if it isn't fixed very soon! This is one way to fix it! God, you haven't fixed it! I will fix it! Presto-change! I have become smarter than God!*
- Yes, *Hagar* may get pregnant. Yes, it may, for a time, even look like I was right and I helped God **"revise"** his failed plan as the angel in the cartoon suggested. Yes, my "fix" makes me **feel** better for the moment because it is within my lifetime and under my control! **BUT, Oh! What a mess! Oh! What a mess!**

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- **"Are you sure, God?"** is the question behind Habakkuk's words in the Scripture we will consider today—chapter 1:12-2:1. I am going to read them from the version called the N-E-T Bible. The "net" Bible—that doesn't mean it is uniquely the *internet* Bible—N-E-T stands for "New English Translation."
- I am using this translation with maybe a few adjustments of my own for two reasons. **First**, I think it does a particularly good job bringing out the nuances of the word-picture Habakkuk employs here.
- **Second**, it is the only translation I own, so far, that prints, *displays*, even in gold on the spine of its paper and ink, printed edition an internet link, >bible.org<.
- When I am finished this morning, a few of you may conclude I am a Luddite when it comes to digital innovations. You may think I would probably have rejected the printing press as "being of the devil" if I would have been around back when they first used it to print Bibles and other books. If that is what you conclude, I will conclude, you will have missed one of my *smaller* points.
- I would say that *you* will not have thought as deeply about what Habakkuk is telling us today as you might need to think.
- So here is the text of Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 from the NET Bible:

- **READ Habakkuk 1:12-2:1**

***¹² LORD, you have been active from ancient times;
my sovereign God, you are immortal.***

LORD, you have made them your instrument of judgment.

***Protector, you have appointed them as your instrument of
punishment.***

¹³ You are too just to tolerate evil;

you are unable to condone wrongdoing.

So why do you put up with such treacherous people?

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Why do you say nothing when the wicked devour those more righteous than they are?

***14 You made people like fish in the sea,
like animals in the sea that have no ruler.***

***15 The Babylonian tyrant pulls them all up with a fishhook;
he hauls them in with his throw net.***

***When he catches them in his dragnet,
he is very happy.***

***16 Because of his success he offers sacrifices to his throw net
and burns incense to his dragnet;
for because of them he has plenty of food,
and more than enough to eat.***

***17 Will he then continue to fill and empty his throw net?
Will he always destroy nations and spare none?***

(2)

***1 I will stand at my watch post;
I will remain stationed on the city wall.
I will keep watching so I can see what he says to me
and can know, how I should answer
when he counters my argument.***

- Verse 12 asks God if he is sure about His shocking plan to use the Babylonians as his agents. Habakkuk is indeed finding this unbelievable, just as God said he would.
- *"I know I complained about the unrighteousness of Judah—of the remaining Israelites—your people, God, but using the exceedingly even more evil Babylonians to deal with your sinning people???!"*
- There is a tendency within us, when we think we are smarter than God, to argue that we are also better—more righteous—than others

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God might be using to carry out his plan. We use this self-righteous streak to bolster our conclusion that we probably have a better grasp on the situation than God.

- Habakkuk knows Scripture. He knows God's revealed truth about Himself. He is not like the fool who questions God's omnipotence, omniscience, or perfect righteousness
- In the first half of verse 12 he explicitly recognizes the track record of power and permanency of YAWEH, the LORD God of Israel, whom he is questioning.
- He recognizes Yahweh God has been at work on His plan from when even Habakkuk sees as "*ancient times*"—from the "Beginning" and through the times of Abraham Isaac and Jacob—throughout the history of Israel.
- He knows God is in charge of all this. "*Yahweh, you are indeed God!*" You are indeed the "*Sovereign One*" who is in charge and in control.
- The NIV suggests Habakkuk then speaks of God preserving Habakkuk's life but I think the N.E.T. gets a textual problem right in concluding that Habakkuk then recognizes God himself will never die. "*Yahweh, LORD God, you are immortal.*" Yahweh—Israel's God--will never make a poor plan that will fail and cost God His life as a mere human leader might do.
- **BUT....**the second half of verse 12 asks... "**Are you sure?**" Are you sure you want to appoint the ***even less-righteous-than-us*** Babylonians to carry out part of your plan to judge us, your own people, for our **not-nearly-as-bad unrighteousness?**
- Do you see how the self-righteous way of thinking by comparison of relative sinfulness adds to the confusion of how God works?
- How can God use people, who in our smarter opinion, deserve judgment even more than we do to judge us?

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- *God, you are supposed to be our "rock"—our "protector" yet you are going to turn these Babylonians loose on us? Do you realize what they could do to us? It doesn't seem fair in our smarter way of thinking.*
- Habakkuk continues to explain things to God in verse 13. He suggests for God to even "look upon," much less use, such unrighteous people is a mistake. The NIV keeps the figurative language the NET provides the force of the figure: **You are too just to even tolerate such evil. You can't condone this!** AND it sure seems like you are as I look at the situation from my "smartness."
- *So why is this your plan God? Why do you put up with treacherous sinners like those really bad folks? Why would you let them win over us when we are more righteous than they are?*
- The self-righteous attitude of "we may be sinners but we are not as bad as those other sinners" is out in the open now. The irony—actually hypocrisy—is that the book started with Habakkuk questioning God for not judging the people he is now defending as being *lesser* sinners than the Babylonians!
- Do you see what is happening here to Habakkuk's smarter than God stance when it comes to judgment? Who gets judged and when? Where do we draw the line that some have gone too far? We will usually always draw it where we are safe but the other guys whose sin we hate more than our own gets judged—like he deserves.
- Does Habakkuk want the UZZAH system? In it, when one grabs the falling Ark of the Covenant, after God said don't touch it, you are always and immediately zapped dead in judgement?
- Do we want to live under the Ananias and Saphira rules for judgement? Tell a lie to a church leader, even somewhat by omission and by allowing a false assumption, and the 2nd-mile servants will be

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carrying you out to bury you as you are immediately killed by God in judgment.

- For a bit, Habakkuk thought he could figure out just judgment for sin. We sometimes think we can as well. Are any of us "smarter" than God in figuring out judgment?
- Verses 14-17 are Habakkuk's picturesque emphasis on just how bad and deserving of judgement are the Babylonians.
- They are like commercial—not recreational but big-time—fishermen who powerfully and almost effortlessly swallow up the helpless—leaderless fish in the sea.
- If they don't catch them one way, "hooks," they'll catch them another way, "nets." They are relentless predators and no weak, by comparison, fish will escape their overwhelming power.
- Of course, this makes the fishermen happy. Their nets are full. This is their goal and pragmatically they have done what it takes to accomplish it.
- Of course, they are stupid enough in Habakkuk's eyes, to miss reality. The marauding fishermen mistakenly think their nets are magical. Their nets are like powerful *gods*, or at least they have powerful gods connected with the empowering them to catch all the fish. They deserve to be worshiped with incense and prayers because they work to give the fishermen what they want!
- Verse 17 asks: *"Is it your plan God to just keep on letting them do this? Is it your plan to let the people more evil than us triumph over others and us? When you do this God, it sure makes it seem as if their gods are more powerful than you are, GOD!!! What do you think God? Have I help you see something here you have missed in making your plan? Could I be smarter than you?"*

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- The chapter break for chapter 2 comes with this *"Are you sure, God?"* still hanging in the air. The first verse of chapter 2 certainly introduces God's response to this question but I think it also provides a lesson in Habakkuk's reaction to having this question still in his head.

2 I will stand at my watch post;

I will remain stationed on the city wall.

I will keep watching so I can see what he says to me

and can know how I should answer

when he counters my argument.

- Israelite prophets often saw themselves as the "watchmen" guarding the city by signaling the alarm when an attack was coming. Habakkuk sees himself as the man called to raise the alarm. However, he is confused about the exact nature of that alarm.
- Judah, the remainder of the people of God, has strayed from righteousness. He must raise the alarm that judgment is coming from God. But how can he raise it when God is going to judge in a way that doesn't make sense to him? In a way that seems unfair? So un-God-like?
- Still, in the immediacy of his feelings and their confusion, he doesn't just desert his post. He doesn't walk away because he can't figure it out.
- Some today would conclude rather quickly that if they can't figure this one out then God must not really exist or God certainly isn't who the Bible says he is.
- I dare not push harder on this than the text does, but it does seem to me this verse is here for the same reason other verses that suggest "waiting on the LORD" are there in other contexts.

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- Not waiting, rushing to judgment about matters as deep as this on the basis that we are smarter than God even if we won't say that out loud, is like jumping off a cliff. It feels in the immediate moment that there is no other direction to go.
- If I can't figure this problem out right now, there must be no answer. If I can't fix this right now not even God can fix it.
- I'm not denying the problem of the pain in waiting for an answer to an immediate problem that feels like it is absolutely destroying your life and will do so any moment unless you come up with the right answer.
- The pain is real. Flesh doesn't like pain. We convince ourselves we are smart enough—even smarter than God—to fix it right now!
- These messages from the book of *Habakkuk* are not messages about answers to a Covid-19 pandemic or about facing the violent destruction of the way of life we have known. Yet our days provide so many illustrations of human nature—the flesh- and how it works.
- I could cite many examples, but let me give you a couple of excerpts from things I read just this week to give you a sense of what I am suggesting.
- The sinful impulse of the flesh of humans is to act with immediacy to the slightest pain even if it is the mental and emotional pain of confusion. The impulse is to believe oneself smart enough to have the answer because any more immediate answer is better than waiting.
- For Christians, for believers in the "active from ancient times," "sovereign," "immortal," God Habakkuk described in those first verses this morning, living out this fleshly impulse to immediacy requires we must see ourselves to be smarter than God and that probably can't be good, right?

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- One professor trying to make sense of the sometimes contradictory riotous destruction of the symbols of our nation's past and the "dark cloud" they represent for its future democracy speaks of geography, but you'll see his idea is ultimately about being confronted with the fleshly temptations presented by *immediacy*.
- Professor Trueman writes: ***...social media has dissolved geography and thereby the traditional terms of ownership that geographical limits entailed. My sister can sit in the village*** (it was very remote, I believe in Africa?) ***where we grew up and watch a Minneapolis policeman squeeze the life out of George Floyd. And she can feel not just an empathy for the man as he dies but an immediacy to the event, which elicits a desire to respond. Two hundred years ago—even fifty years ago—this would not have been possible.***
- As I warned, lest you conclude I am just a Luddite who hates any new technology, I am not against this technology. I use it and find it helpful. I am against the false evidence this technology can give us by making us feel smarter than God when confronted with the temptations of immediacy.
- Justin Poythress, a younger, so I assume necessarily hipper son, of a more well-known author and theologian comes at the temptation I am highlighting from a very different angle.
- He bemoans the loss of what he labels "*boredom*." What he means is the loss of those times when our lives are not filled with more and more information from sources we now can select and even shape to tell us the very things we want to hear that make us believe we are indeed very smart! He argues this all this destroys humility.
- Justin points out that this is not new to our day, even if our digital world exacerbates the problem. He cites the 17th century thinker

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Blaise Pascal who wrote: *"all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."*

- Immediacy tempts the flesh to act and our world is more immediately driven than ever before. It can cause us to lack humility that can have us saying--I am smart even smarter than God.
- *"So, God, are you sure about this? Are you sure about what you are doing in my life? In our country? In our world? I can tell you how to fix this God right down to the people you ought to judge right now for their sins that are so much greater than mine!"*
- Habakkuk had the answer in the truth he already knew to his question about God using the evil Babylonians.
- ***God lives forever. Humans do not.***
- Therefore, we are tempted, even driven by *immediacy* to conclude we are smart enough to act NOW!
- God is not. He will explain this to the confused prophet in his answer to Habakkuk's questioning of his eternal plan.