

Reformation Sunday  
The Reverend John H. Brock

5:30 p.m. Saturday, October 30, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

Grace to you and Peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

The people of God were messed up. There were quite a number of them who felt that, while God indeed was God, God didn't necessarily have total and complete control over what was going on in their life, because they didn't WANT God to have total and complete control. God's supposed to watch over the country. The Lord God is supposed to keep everybody safe from harm, from our enemies, from starvation. The Lord is supposed to make sure the economy is strong, food is plentiful, foreigners are far away, taxes are low, profits are high. Attending worship is seen as important or at least being SEEN attending is seen as being important. It's there at worship that you talk about the possibility of armed conflicts with our potential enemies. You discuss either what boneheads all of the politicians are, or how much you support the current administration. The question though, arises, as I say all of this: am I talking about the people in Jerusalem of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, or am I talking about the people of the Holy Roman Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD or am I talking about the United States, here today? Let's start with the 7<sup>th</sup> century, BC.

We don't know much about the prophet Habakkuk. What we do know is primarily guess work. We're pretty sure he is preaching at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, BC. That's the time when there's a lot of, let's call it, "change" going on there in the southern, and at that point in history, the ONLY Jewish kingdom, the one known as Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians about one hundred years prior. The Assyrians themselves were beaten by the Chaldeans, as their called throughout the book of Habakkuk, or as we know them better as the Babylonians (and yes that is the same Babylon that we still hear about today. Those folks have been around a *long* time). The Babylonians are drooling over the opportunity to add a little bit more land and some Mediterranean coastline to their borders.

The king of Judah at that time, a guy called Jehoiakim, is considered by the historians to be inept, because he was busy trying to make deals with the power brokers in order to stave off invasions from various countries. And, in cow-towing to those countries, he ends up, we could call it, "backsliding" on his own faith issues, which of course does NOT sit well with Habakkuk and the other prophets of his day, which would be folks like Jeremiah. Habakkuk looks around him. He sees impending doom for his country, for his city, for his people. He knows that WHEN, not IF, the Babylonians come trotting into town, the innocent are going to suffer right along with the guilty. And so we get his lament as we heard it tonight. First chapter, verse 3: "Why do you make me see wrong doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise." "What's the deal, Lord? Don't you see all this crap happening all around us? Don't you care, Lord, and why are you making me see it?"

Martin Luther faced a lot of the same kind of issues. The Ottoman Empire was slowly rising to power, and their general, Suleiman, was slowly moving his troops westward. Suleiman had united most of the Middle East and North Africa. They had taken over Constantinople and renamed it as Istanbul. As they move out of Turkey and what we know as modern day Macedonia, Serbia, and Bulgaria, before they eventually stopped right outside the city wall of Vienna in 1529. That was well after the posting of the 95 Thesis by a German monk and teacher. But it was definitely weighing on the minds of most of the residents of the Holy Roman Empire throughout the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Holy Roman Empire rulers were not the most effective. There was often a lot of infighting going on, deals were being cut with competing princes so that the empire wouldn't get hamstrung by factions within itself fighting each other, leaving the whole ripe for invasion from outside forces like, say, the Turks.

Martin Luther looked around himself and saw fear of an invading army. He also saw the many ways in which the church was striving to raise money in part to fight the invaders, but also in larger part simply to increase their own bank account. Luther saw a lot of injustice, imbalance, and inequities. He saw scripture being held up as a standard, and yet what was being practiced by those in charge was anything **but** Biblical. And Luther cried to God, if not literally, then at least figuratively, "Why do you make me see the wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise." 1:3

It strikes me that it is really not that much different than today. We've got elections coming up. Now I don't care what political party you align yourself with, there's probably somebody in office (whether or not your own party or not) that you probably think is doing a poor job, and probably never should have been elected in the first place. So let's elect somebody else new into their place. There's a rally going on down in Washington, DC today that's being put on by a couple of entertainers from Comedy Central. It's called "The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear." I just checked on-line and they had several thousand people down there attending it. It's being put on partly in jest because of all the hyperbole and rhetoric that's on the airwaves, in print, or on-line. One candidate saying that something his opponent has done is unforgivable, another candidate saying that their advisory voted for a certain bill or with some other party, or those who say "don't vote for that person - because of their ethnic heritage, they simply can't be trusted." I even heard an ad that is running in Nevada that's being sponsored by a group from Virginia, that's being aimed at a specific ethnic group, and the message is along the lines of, 'Are you fed up with all of the broken promises of those folks that are elected? Then show them how mad you are! Don't Vote.' Do I need to say anything about the tensions we feel because of the military conflicts we are currently engaged in? The fears, the stress, the uncertainty. All this only goes toward causing me to quote Habakkuk: "Why do you make me see the wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise." 1:3.

Do you remember that one of the points that Martin Luther and the other reformers were trying to make, actually has its roots back here in our reading from Habakkuk, from the second chapter. There in chapter 2:4, "the righteous live by faith." That gets bumped all the way into Paul's letter to the Romans. In chapter one of Romans, Paul writes "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:17 NRSV) And from Romans we get Martin Luther and the other reformers who see that verse and use it as a foundation of their chant: 'For we are saved by grace through faith.'

I am guessing that maybe there are few of you who are wondering how I was going to get my 7<sup>th</sup> century BC prophet to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is maybe a little odd that here we are six centuries beyond the Reformation and that human beings and the nature of life, our woes and joys, our bickerings and fears, our joy and laughter, really haven't changed all that much. What else though, that hasn't changed is the Lord God's presence in our everyday lives?

Just as God was present for the people in Jerusalem, just as God will be with the people as they are taken away into exile in Babylon, just as God was present with Luther on his journey from being a lawyer to becoming a monk, from a monk to becoming a scholar, from being a scholar to becoming a reformer, so, too, God is with us each and every day. Not matter what the political front looks like; regardless of the color of the terrorist threat level, despite whatever else is going on in our own lives; Habakkuk reminded the people of his day. He spoke to Luther and the reformers in the 1500's and Habakkuk speaks to us today, when he says in the closing verses of his book:

<sup>17</sup> Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the  
stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my  
salvation, <sup>19</sup> for GOD, the Lord, is my strength.

*(Habakkuk 3:17-19 NRSV)*

Amen.

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