

Sunday, September 4, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Hurricanes, Habakkuk, and Hallelujahs!"

Today we will finish our series on the minor prophets with a visit with Habakkuk. Now Habakkuk is the 8th of the 12 minor prophets. He wrote sometime around the 7th century BC and Chapters 1 and 2 of his book were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. His name, in Hebrew, means “embrace.” Rabbinic tradition identifies Habakkuk as the Shunamite woman’s son who was restored to life by the prophet Elisha in 2Kings. The book of Daniel names Habakkuk as the son of Joshua.

Sermon

The water came streaming in. The landscape was changed.

What once was, was no longer. Everything looked different.

In a matter of seconds lives were transformed.

This could be an accounting of the hurricane last week, or it could be Habakkuk’s description of God’s redeeming presence in his life.

It could also be testimony from a person who has turned their life over to God and felt the transforming power of relinquishing control to a power greater than ourselves.

Over the past few weeks, we have heard the minor prophets speak of sin and the need for repentance. They spoke of God’s judgment and of covenant obligations to obedience. The prophets of old, as well as those of today, are people who look at current events through the eyes of faith. They are interpreters of the present, more than foretellers of the future. The true prophet acts as a conscience of the community and we cannot live well without them.

So today, we visit our last minor prophet in this summer series. I hope that you have enjoyed the exploration of these little known scribes and have found something interesting in their commentary on the human condition.

I know that I have enjoyed the in depth study required to preach on something unfamiliar and the reflection needed to interpret what their words might be saying to us today.

I have learned much from these prophets and feel compelled to pay closer attention to both our modern day prophets and to the lesser known parts of the Bible.

Augustine is credited with bestowing the title, “minor prophets” on these twelve writers. In “City of God” Augustine reviews how each prophet pointed to Jesus and our present relationship with him. Rather than reviewing the prophets from a historical perspective, Augustine used their writings as supportive sermon material to define the relationship between Jesus Christ and humans. Augustine cites Habakkuk’s third chapter as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. When Habakkuk says “God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise. The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden,” Augustine says he is describing the coming of the reign of Christ.

Last weekend as I listened to all of the hurricane predictions and watched as people prepared themselves for the onslaught, I couldn't help but think of the prophets of old. The prophet's genre, as it were, was to warn people to get ready for what was to come. Most often, it seemed that people didn't pay them much mind, except of course the Ninevites and Jonah.

With the hurricane, as with the communities of the prophets, those who did listen were better off.

The book of Habakkuk is structured much like our own relationships with God. Habakkuk begins with a complaint, then the Lord answers that, then Habakkuk has a second complaint, the Lord answers that and then Habakkuk prays.

How often does our own interaction with God follow this pattern. We start off by complaining about God's absence, or injustice, or lack of attention to a matter that we feel is compelling. God answers – sometimes we don't like the answer so we complain some more. God answers – we start to realize that maybe God knows more than we do and so we turn to heartfelt prayer, seeking God's presence and wonder in our lives. It is them that we are transformed.

Habakkuk is characterized as a psalm in which God comes from beyond the borders of Israel to make himself known – to shake heaven and earth with his power, to help his people and to deliver his anointed.

The prayer ends with a rapturous statement that the man who has found God, even absent of worldly goods, has found sufficient strength and joy.

The first two chapters of Habakkuk are a dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk's question to God is, "How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" God's reply is that the Kingdom of God is coming and while waiting for it to arrive the righteous are simply required to be faithful.

God says, "Be astonished! Be astounded! For a work is being done in your days that you would not believe if you were told." God provides Habakkuk with a glimpse of the coming kingdom. He promises that justice will prevail and that society will be well ordered.

Commentator William Temple describes Habakkuk's experience this way:

In his fellowship with God he has found that nothing matters in comparison with that fellowship. He has been perplexed that the ungodly should prosper, and almost thought of throwing in his lot with them. But now he knows that, however great their possessions, they are truly destitute, while the man who has found fellowship with God is rich though he possess nothing. That is the real solution – not an answer to the riddle, but the attainment of a state of mind in which there is no desire to ask it.

This is my prayer for us, as we go forward into a new church year. Let us bind ourselves to one another to truly walk in God's ways and live in fellowship with one another and with God.