

Remember Mercy

Habakkuk 1:1-3; 3:1-2, 17-19

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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I know that each Sunday when I get up here to preach, I am speaking to people who are in different places in life.

Some are happy, some are sad. Some are healthy, some are struggling with health challenges. Some are full of vibrant faith, some are doubting. Some are energized, some are weary. I hope to speak a word that connects to everyone, but I know this isn't always possible.

And I also stand up here feeling different things at different times. For me, these last few weeks have felt heavy, due to global events, a few funerals, and just the many people I know who are going through hard things.

One of the gifts of Scripture is that it gives us language for heavy things and seasons where things are hard. This is why I was drawn to the book of Habbakuk this week.

This morning's sermon has three kinds of distinct parts or movements. These movements trace the readings from the book of Habakkuk that we've already heard.

1. Lament
2. Memory/Calling to Mind
3. Praise

We begin with lament.

Habakkuk was a prophet who wrote to the people of Judah around 612-599 BC.

Habakkuk looks around at his own people and sees injustice, inequality, wickedness, and violence. He looks around and sees the people of God looking like anything but.

And he complains about this to God.

The sense of grievance and outrage drip off Habakkuk's pen.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?...

³Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise...

and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgement comes forth perverted.

The words could as easily be a response to the news of the day in the twenty-first century as they are to the realities faced by the people of Jerusalem six hundred years before the time of Christ!

There is Israel and Gaza, of course. We are two weeks into a war that seems like it will just continue to cause suffering upon suffering upon suffering.

There is war in Ethiopia. This week I read that between 2020-22 the death toll in this region far exceeded that of the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict going back to 1948, combined with all of the Arab-Israeli wars since the foundation of the Jewish state.

(The author quite rightly wondered why Ethiopia doesn't grab hold of the attention of the world like the scenes in the Middle East.)

(I wondered why as Mennonites our concern for a region where there are well over 300 000 Mennonites and well over a thousand churches pales in comparison to a region where there are zero Mennonite churches.)

There is also the war in the Ukraine which shows no sign of ending soon.

There are other stories, too. In our constantly connected digital world, there is always something going on somewhere far away that could and should call forth our outrage and sorrow. And it is always only a click away.

Closer to home, there is the plight of indigenous peoples in our country and in our city.

There are the rising deaths of despair across racial and socioeconomic lines. There is the increasing prevalence of anxiety, depression, and addiction.

And then there are our more private pains.

There is the death of those dear to us. I was looking through my files this week as I prepared for Ernie Sawatsky's memorial service on Friday. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, we have lost thirteen people in our little church.

Even though many of these funerals were more like joyous home-goings than tragedies, death takes a toll on a community.

There are perhaps strained relationships. Maybe financial struggles.

There is worry about the future, worry about the church, worry about climate change, worry about our children, worry about a polarized society where so many seem so angry all the time.

Again, the list could go on.

And our response to all this (and more) is as natural as Habakkuk's.

How long? Why do you tolerate this, God? Why don't you listen to our cries? Why is there so much in your world that is not as it should be?

It's important to note that this is a *human* response to evil and injustice, not just a religious or a Christian one.

I've spent a lot of time over the years writing and thinking about the existence of suffering and how it pushes many people to disbelieve in God out of protest.

How could there be a God if the world is so bad? If God was so good, why wouldn't he do anything to help?

And yet the very *possibility* of complaint requires convictions both that things should be better than they are and that Someone exists who can make them better than they are.

This is the basis for any complaint, any lament.

As one commentator put it,

The paradox of lament is that there is no lament without a foundation of faith. Grief, sorrow, despair can all exist alongside a void of faith, but argumentative lament presupposes that Someone is listening.¹

And so, the church can and should be a space where lament is acceptable even expected. Because we do believe that Someone is listening.

The second movement of faith is memory or a “deliberate calling to mind.”

O Lord, I have heard of your renown,
and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.
In our own time revive it;
in our own time make it known;
in wrath may you remember mercy.

Habakkuk doesn't just marinate in lament. He doesn't just stay stuck in complaining mode indefinitely (perhaps some of us know a person or two who does just this!).

No, he deliberately calls to mind God's goodness from a time when it seemed more obvious.

One of the leftovers of the pandemic for me is a large group chat with about nine guys. We're all roughly the same age. Some of these guys I've known since I was a kid, some I got to know later in life.

The group chat started when we were all stuck in our houses and going a little stir crazy. Usually, it's just sharing a bunch of goofy memes and banter and links to funny things we saw or read.

¹ Pamela Cooper-White, “Pastoral Perspective on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 243-44.

Truth be told, it can often be a bunch of middle-aged dudes acting like teenagers.

But every once in a while, something serious pops up. Someone will post a prayer request. Someone's kid or wife will be going through a hard time. Someone in our circle will be facing a health challenge of some kind.

And sometimes, someone will break through all the goofy banter with a serious question. This week, one person threw the following out:

“Where do you guys get a sense of connection with God?”

That's a big question for a group chat. It was a bold move. But gradually the responses started to trickle in.

- Music (playing, listening)
- People, relationships
- Driving through the mountains
- Driving over Logan's Pass
- The morning dew on a golf course, the smell of the grass, the sounds of the birds
- Walking in the woods
- Watching our kids succeed, pursue things that they love
- I mentioned the jail, and how God often shows up among the down and out, the guilty, the abandoned.

It was quite a list.

What were we doing? We were calling to mind times when God *felt* real. We were “standing in awe of the work of the Lord.”

It may be a bit of a stretch, but I wonder if we were, in a way, saying, “I have heard of your renown... do it again. Make your goodness known.”

Perhaps we were even saying, “You know there are so many times in our lives where connection with God feels elusive. Where the mundane and the painful crowds out the mystery and the beauty and the awe of God and of God's world.

It takes an act of deliberate memory to bring these things from the background to the foreground.”

Christian Wiman is a teacher of religion and literature at Yale Divinity School. In his 2018 book *He Held Radical Light* he says this:

The great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel once defined faith as primarily faithfulness to a time when we had faith. We remember those moments of heightened awareness in our lives, these clearings within consciousness in which faith is self-evident and God too obvious and omnipresent to need that name, and we try to remain true to them. **It's a tenuous, tenacious discipline of memory and hope.**²

I love that last line. Faith is a tenuous, tenacious discipline of memory and hope.

And so, we very deliberately remember the goodness of God and we plead with God to remember mercy.

For every time when we felt the closeness of God in our lives is an act of mercy, is it not?

Every beautiful experience, every life-giving relationship, every moment of genuine connection—these things all point beyond themselves.

They can be easy to forget, especially in a world where so much seems to be bad.

(And I would add, especially in a media context that is constantly throwing all the bad things in front us 24/7 because keeping us fearful, angry, and outraged is profitable! We should ponder this more than we do, especially those of us inclined to read and watch more than is good for us!)

But part of the task of faith is to stubbornly call to mind God's many kindnesses and blessings and acts of power and say, "Do it again. We need it again. *I* need it again."

Lament, memory, and then finally joyful hope.

² Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), 34.

The book of Habakkuk begins with complaint, but it ends with one of the most marvelous and poetic expressions of determined hope in all of Scripture:

17 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,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

In the Bible, lament nearly always comes with an “and yet” attached to it. It always leads to a renewed determination to hope in God.

To quote the great Reformer John Calvin, “Room must always be given for hope.”

And this image of rejoicing even though things look bleak is such a powerful one.

A few years ago, I had coffee with a young adult who was pondering some of these big questions of life and faith and suffering and goodness. They had a notebook full of reflections on these matters.

Near the end of our time together, this person said, “Would you write something about hope in here? What does hope mean to you?”

I paused. I don’t tend to like to produce something on the spot. I wanted time to think, to get it just right, to produce something that would be acceptable to smarter, more theologically sophisticated friends.

But these objections rather quickly revealed themselves to be mostly about my own pride. There was a blank sheet of paper in front of me, and an inquisitive human being who was thinking deeply and carefully and deliberately about hope as an anchor for life.

So, I picked up the pen, apologized in advance for my handwriting, and scribbled out these words:

There is a reason that the proverb says, “Without hope, the people perish.” We humans are hard-wired for hope, I think, and are always stumbling toward some vision of wholeness and flourishing, goodness and peace, truth and beauty, even when we’re barely aware of it, often when we’re failing miserably at it.

To hope is to be alive. To hope is to keep moving. To hope is to believe that God is beckoning onward, toward our best selves and toward the better world that we have both the opportunity and the obligation to participate in bringing about.

To hope is to believe that what matters most to us will one day be validated and purified and rendered whole.

To hope is to trust in the One who has placed hope within us and who daily summons us toward its consummation, our true home.

To this, I thought later, I should have added, “Even when the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine.”

Even when the news is bad. Even when the future looks bleak. Even when God’s hand in our world and in our lives does not seem obvious.

Even then, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Lament, memory, and joyful hope.

This is a pattern, or a movement of faith that is reproduced throughout Scripture, and throughout the lives of God’s people.

And I should add one last thing. There is no specific formula for how this works. It’s not as though we say, “Well, I’ve spent x amount of time and energy on lament, so now it’s time to move on to memory so that I can get to hope by Friday.

That’s obviously not how this works. There are seasons in our lives where any one of these three might be most prominent.

I would simply say that it's important not to get stuck, especially on lament. If you get stuck on joy, maybe not as big of a deal (although I do think there is something unhealthy about a faith that never acknowledges the shadow side of life).

But in general terms, I think these three movements can together contribute to a faith that is honest, that is disciplined and deliberate, and that is full of joy and hope.

So may God help us as we seek to be faithful wherever we find ourselves in these movements of faith.

And in this troubled and beautiful world, may we and most importantly may God remember mercy.

Amen.

