

Hey Preacher! Sermon Series
Is It OK to Question God?
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
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I have questions. That's nothing new for me. I've always been an inquisitive person. I remember when we moved to Washington D.C. in the seventh grade, my family and I made a trip to the Mall. It was my first time there so I was filled with questions. How tall is the Washington Monument? Does the president really live in the White House? Can you swim in the Reflecting Pool? Finally, my step-father turned to me and said, "Can you do anything besides ask questions?" and I said, "What's wrong with a question?"

But the questions I have today are a little more somber and pointed than the height of the Washington Monument. Most of my questions start with, "Why?" and end with anger or tears. I wonder if your questions are like mine, if they deal with things like unfairness and injustice and what feels God's absence. Many of us may have been told we're not allowed to ask questions. "God's ways are not our ways," we were told, which is the divine version of the parental, "Because I said so, that's why!" But sometimes, when life makes absolutely no sense, that response feels more like a copout than a comfort, and I bet that response has driven a lot of people away from God. God's ways are indeed not our ways, but if what's going on in the world and in our lives ARE God's ways, I'm not so sure I like this God.

To say we can't give voice our questions is to ask us to go against the very essence of our human nature. We are a questioning species, and it starts before we can even articulate our questions. For example, when a crawling baby finds something on the ground, what do they do with it? Right into their mouth! They're trying to figure out whether this clod of substance is a piece of dirt or an Oreo, and either way they're going to eat it. Our curiosity starts early and continues to grow as we do. And as the complexity level of our lives grow, so do the nature of our questions. Who am I? What is my purpose? Who is my soulmate? Is there something bigger than me going on here? We ask our questions and then spend our lifetime searching for answers. So it seems only natural that we should also be able to ask our questions to God.

If you believe that, then you have a kindred spirit in Habakkuk. Habakkuk breaks the mold for prophetic books. The typical pattern for a prophet was to hear God's word and then relay it to God's people. Prophecies start with something like, "The word of the Lord that came to Isaiah..." and then would spell out all that God told Isaiah to say. But not Habakkuk. His prophecy starts with a question, and it's a little more pointed than asking about God's retirement. "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'violence!' and you will not save?" This is less of a prophecy and more of a lament psalm, in which the writer cries out to God for help because of suffering or persecution. This could have been written last week, not centuries ago.

How long, God? Where are you? Do those questions resonate with you? From the early Christians who were facing their death for others' entertainment, to women accused of witchcraft, to Jews in Europe and blacks in the United States, to modern-day believers in Egypt and Syria, this same cry has bounced off the heavens. And now, those cries have taken on a new urgency in our country. Why, God? Why the coronavirus? Why Ahmaud Arbury and Breonna Taylor and George Floyd? Why looting and rioting and violence? How long are you going to let this happen? When our personal lives or our communities or our nation plummets into the

darkness of desperation, who among us has not uttered Habakkuk's cry: Where are you, God? How long are you going to ignore this?

Habakkuk's questions arise from the situation he saw around him. God's people had gone astray yet again, ignoring God's law and doing their own thing, which had led to wickedness and irreverence. So Habakkuk says, "How long are you going to stand by and watch this happen?" Later in Chapter 1, God says, "Don't worry, the wicked Israelites will be punished because I'm sending the Babylonians to invade them." Now think about that. Your child was supposed to clean his room and didn't, so you punish him by inviting the neighborhood bully into your home to beat him up. Habakkuk responds to God's answer by basically saying, "Beg your pardon, O Holy and Omnipotent One, but that's the worst idea I've ever heard! How does this solve anything? I'm not so sure I like this God."

It doesn't take a Babylonian invasion or the death of a child or a Holocaust to raise these kinds of questions for us. They arise from the situations we see around us: injustice and violence and suffering that makes cry out to God, "Where ARE you?" How can we NOT question in the face of all we see going on around us? These are seriously scary times, and to pretend like it's not OK to question God is to not take God seriously. If we truly believe that God is our creator, that God loves all of us, that God is a God of justice, then God has some explaining to do about what's going on down here. We have questions.

Those questions are not a sign of unbelief or a lack of faith; in fact, I would argue just the opposite. To question God starts with the assumption that there IS a God, and that God is worthy of our questions. I believe the question may be the highest form of mindful praise, because instead of settling for empty platitudes and Christian clichés, the questioner is willing to engage God in the thorny issues that challenge our faith each day. I believe the toughest questions come from the folks who are trying their hardest to work out their faith. It takes profound belief to listen to God's promises in the Bible, then to look at how far we are from God's kingdom in this world, and to ask God, "What's the deal?"

Asking those questions can be hard, but not as hard as waiting for the answer. At the beginning of Chapter 2, after asking his questions, Habakkuk says, "I will stand at my watchpost and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint." Not only is he willing to ask the question, he says, "I'm not leaving here until you answer me." It's like a prophetic sit-in. Occupy Jerusalem! I love the prophet's tenacity, his persistence in seeking an answer. He's not waiting to see IF God will answer; he's waiting to hear what God will say WHEN God answers. This is real faith, not a faith that gives up on God at the first sign of disappointment, not a faith that gives to God what's left over, but a faith that wrestles with God, a faith that grabs hold of God and says, "I'm not letting go until you bless me."

Habakkuk gets his answer, but it's probably not the one he wanted. God says, "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay." God promises Habakkuk there is a vision, and that Habakkuk should write it down in such big, bold letters that passersby can't miss it, like a billboard on a freeway. And that message is this: "God is still here!"

But wait. That's not really an answer, is it? The question was "How long?" Our question is, "Why?" We don't want to be put off like we're some child pestering her mother for attention. We don't want to be dismissed like some underling wasting the boss' time. We want decisive action, we want our questions answered now and we want them answered in ways that match our

expectations. Instead, the answer God gives Habakkuk is, “Not yet.” For some of us, that may not feel like an answer.

What this book reminds us is that a necessary part of living as God’s people is the waiting in between the asking of the questions and the hearing of the answers. We live as Saturday people, in between the pain and anguish of Good Friday and the answer of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday, trusting that God is indeed still here and still at work, even when God seems far away. The challenge for us is this: Do we need to have all the answers in order to be faithful? Do we need to know exactly what God’s plan is before we choose to participate in it? Do we hold back on our commitment to God until we know for sure where God’s calling us?

Are world is coming apart at the seams and it’s time for God’s people to take action. We don’t have to have all the answers first. We simply must follow the example set by Jesus Christ, who showed us what it meant to love God and love your neighbor. We can’t wait on God to fix our mess; it’s up to us to start the work of healing and reconciliation, and that starts by be willing to look at ourselves and name our complicity in the problem. No one is innocent; we’ve all contributed to this divide. So we confess our sinfulness, we name our biases and prejudices, and then we get to work.

I’ve told you the story before of the US politician who made fact-finding trip to Africa to learn more about the AIDS epidemic. After one particularly trying day filled with disease and death, the politician walked out of the medical tent, tear streaming down her face, looked up to the sky, shook her fist, and said, “God, why are you doing something about this?” And she said she heard God as the same question back to her. When we see the divide that exists in our country, are we shaking our fists at the sky or are we committed to doing something about it?

In the end, Habakkuk is OK living in the in-between. He says in Chapter 3, “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.” He demonstrates that faithfulness to God is a willingness to choose to live life with hope and trust, even when answers may not be readily forthcoming.

In the end, Habakkuk’s questions are not answered. He still did not know how long. He still did not know why. He still did not know God’s timetable or what the future held. But he heard something more important that would allow him to face those unknowns. He heard God, who assured Habakkuk of God’s presence and who called him to be faithful without having all the answers. That doesn’t mean we should stop asking our questions. To the contrary, I believe asking our questions and seeking the answers are essential to our faith. That’s what we’ll be doing this summer with our sermon series. But in the meantime, while we wait expectantly for God to answer us, we are called to remember that God is still here, right here with us calling us to take action, to speak love to hate, to shine a light into the darkness, to embody Easter in this endless Good Friday. I have so many questions. You do, too. Let’s seek the answers together.