

## Pastor Letter: Where Is God? (10/30/22)

When I arrived at my first called position, members of a group home for the mentally and physically challenged individuals who were attending the Church's Sunday worship service. As I became acquainted with these people and earned their trust, they asked if I could provide a weekly Bible Study with those interested participants from the home.

I also became good friends with the directors of the home and some of the home's staff. I learned that something had happened before I became the called pastor and several families had left the congregation. The husband-and-wife team, which served as the group home's directors, were one of those families. Eventually I was asked to serve on the Board of Directors of this group home when an opening became available.

I later went on several mission trips to Ethiopia with the husband and became a member of a foundation called Ethiopia Education Endowment Fund with this man. We were attempting to raise a million dollars to support 3 schools in Dembi Dollo, Ethiopia.

I quickly discerned that our congregation did not hold the worship participants from this group home in a positive light. Many members actually were fearful of these residents and would shy away from any physical contact or any interaction with them.

One morning during the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>, one of these residents raised his hand during the sermon to ask a question. To the dismay of most church members, I recognized this individual and asked him what was on his mind. To my amazement, he thoughtfully asked, "Where was God during the attack on the twin towers of the Trade Center and the Pentagon? This man had made the quantum leap from what I was saying during the sermon to his recollection of the horrific events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. I responded by informing him, that God was in the cockpit of those planes and with the people inside the targeted buildings. He was satisfied my words.

This man was attempting to resolve his knowledge of a loving God with the evil tragedy of that infamous day. He verbalized what many people were thinking but were afraid to ask. Where was God? Why did God allow this to happen? Did God not care?

This resident's question reminded me of the very question the prophet Habakkuk was asking in this week's Old Testament lesson. The prophet writes, "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted," (Hab. 1:2-4).

The prophet has recognized the rebellious actions of the Hebrew people from Judah and the Lord's judgment upon his wayward children. The Lord is using foreign nations as his divine acts of judgment. The prophet questions why God would use these foreign nations who have committed more heinous sins than Judah, as instruments of his divine judgement against his own people. Although the prophet is offering genuine prayers of lamentation, the Lord appears to be unresponsive, uncaring, and unusually silent.

Habakkuk says he will climb to the highest place around and wait for the Lord's response to his earnest prayers, "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," (Hab. 2:1).

Finally, the Lord responds with an answer to the prophet's lamentations, "Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner

may read it. <sup>3</sup> 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," (vv. 2-3). The Lord is reminding Habakkuk that God is still in authority and the prophet is to write down the Lord's responding words so all can read it. Those faithful people are to be patient and wait for the Lord's actions to fulfill his divine plan for Israel.

The Lord's response to the prophet's arduous prayers reminded me of the favorite pastime of the resident who ask me the question during my morning sermon. This resident was fairly high functioning and would spend his free time at the group home copying the Bible word by word by hand. At the time of his question, he had already copied the entire Bible by hand and was in the process of typing the Bible into his computer. Instead of watching TV, playing video games, or playing board games, this man spent his free time embracing the Word of God.

When new residents would come to live in the group home, this resident would make sure to invite them to attend the Church's worship service and participate in the home's weekly Bible Study. He was very knowledgeable about the Bible and would often ask some in-dept theological questions during our weekly Bible study. When I would ask rhetorical questions from the pulpit during my sermons, this resident most often would answer with the appropriate response. Many people in the congregation would accuse me of providing the answer to my questions to the residents ahead of time in worship.

The Lord's final comments to Habakkuk also reminded me of the contract between the residents of the group home and many of the people in the congregation, "Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith," (v. 4).

When the storms of this life come crashing down around us, we naturally turn to God in agonizing prayer. When the answers to our ardent prayers are not immediately answered in the manner in which we would like, we have the tendency to lash out at God. When the Lord appears to ignore our petitions, we tend to respond in an irritated manner questioning, "Where are you?, Why are you so far away?, or Why is this happening to me?"

It is not wrong for us to shout at God, shake our fist toward heaven, or even question why? A better response would be to faithfully trust Almighty God's timetable and patiently wait for our Lord to work out the details in his divine manner.

Another positive action is to read aloud the third chapter of the book of Habakkuk that records the prophet's prayer to a righteous God.

Pastor Larry