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Coping in an Unsettled Context: A Message for Today

Tom Olbricht

Some matters never get resolved. Habakkuk's eyes were on the middle east much as are ours. He grew weary over the destruction, violence and especially injustice. Is there a Word from God this morning through Habakkuk?

Habakkuk's Context

First, we need a perspective on Habakkuk's context. In 615 BC, Assyria ruled the middle east from the Persian Gulf to Memphis in Egypt. Its capitol, Ninevah, was in modern Iraq about two hundred miles up the Tigris from Baghdad. For more than a hundred years both Israel and Judah had borne the brunt of Assyria's cruelty. Samaria the northern capitol was destroyed in 721 BC. Kings of Judah such as Hezekiah and Josiah were forced to pay oppressive tribute. The Assyrians denuded whole regions and resettled the people in distant lands. Habakkuk and his contemporaries wondered how long God would permit this unabated violence and plunder (1:2).

Now let's notice God reply (1:5). A change, he said, is on its way. Off in the northeast the Neo-babylonians and Medes are putting together a coalition. These Chaldeans (Babylonians) will bring a hasty end to the atrocious Assyrians (1:6).

Habakkuk was appalled. Even God admitted that the Chaldeans were "ruthless and impetuous" (1:6), promoting their own honor (1:7) "guilty men, whose own strength was their god" (1:11). he blurted out, "O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment: O Rock you have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil: you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?" (1:12-13)

God's reply seems less than satisfactory. He merely assures Habbakuk that however long it takes

the Chaldeans are on the way (2:3). Habbakuk should rest assured that God has no special case for them. They are puffed up, arrogant and have improper desires (2:4). Nevertheless they are a designated instrument for annihilating the callous Assyrians.

What sense is one to make of this strange turn of affairs? Is there no advice for the one longing for justice and peace? Yes, "the righteous will live by being faithful" (2:4 REB).

Our Context

On this day we turn our eyes to the middle east and what do we see? Even now arrogant, puffed up nations who are a law unto themselves. Iraq has devoured a neighbor—Kuwait. In the past she has employed poisoned gas and biological warfare. Saddam Hussein has systematically exterminated opponents, even his own relatives.

A coalition has arisen to right the wrongs, to bring justice to the Kuwaitis. At first glance this action is most praiseworthy. Some of us remember the compromising policies which enabled Hitler to overrun Europe and systematically commit heinous genocide against Slavs and Jews. Saddam must be dethroned before his ambitions run amok.

But doubts remain. Like Habakkuk we ask, are the motives of this new champion pure? Is it possible that the UN ultimatum has a hidden agenda? Of course. We, Japan, the United Kingdom, and all the rest have a supply line to protect: a fossil fuel pipeline imperative for operating our industries and maintaining our standard of living. Efficient, impersonal modern technology enables a less inhuman, almost bloodless offensive. But can it really justify this means of protecting our affluence?

The context in which we live is unsettling

because of all these unresolved conflicts. On this score Habakkuk reminds us of what we probably already know, that there is no such thing as pure motives and perfect justice. This is especially the case with governments, as Reinhold Niebuhr emphasized. There is no such thing as a war in which any side comes off with clean hands. But Habakkuk also says to us that evil persons, such as Hitler, are removed from history through war, a great boon, even if those doing it are duplicitous.

Coping In An Unsettled Context

So how can we cope in such an unsettled context? Habakkuk received an answer from God, "The righteous will live by being faithful." What can this mean?

First off we might back away, being embarrassed to include ourselves among the righteous. After all Paul wrote in Romans, "There is no one righteous; no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). Self proclaimed righteousness, does, in fact, stink. But we are righteous, not on our own cognizance, but because God has declared us righteous. We are a people, however

personally inadequate, who long for God's justice to prevail in a contentious world.

But what is meant, "live by being faithful." I have deliberately quoted The Revised English Bible because I believe this translation is correct. The point is not that we hope by "faith," saying "I have faith that God will work it out", as if nations are merely puppets on a string. "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," won't cut it.

Some notice that the Septuagint translation reads, "the righteous shall live by my faithfulness," meaning God's faithfulness. But this is not the point here. The point is that we are to carry on as we were. I know that is not easy. We are almost ready to throw up our hands and say, we'll just muddle through until this is over and it gets back to normal.

God through Habakkuk, however, tells us to get on with his mission; to spend our days in teaching and learning, and most of all to encourage compassion and justice, and to bring peace to humankind. The Word for this very day is, "The righteous will live by being faithful" to the task to which God has called each of us.