

“What Now?”

Reading: Habakkuk 1-2

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What do we do now? The Bible has many examples and a few instructions for how the people of God can relate to their government and their culture at large. Many saints through the ages have given us examples both good and bad of how to be the faithful people of God in contentious times. We've been spending a lot of time in the books of the prophets this summer, so today we seek guidance from the little book of Habakkuk. It's a beautifully written book from a time when, like almost all writings of the prophets, God's people faced a crisis and had to make some hard choices. The prophet Habakkuk looks out at the nation around him and sees injustices piled on top of one another. He sees the law paralyzed, and he sees the wicked winning. Habakkuk, in essence, calls God to account: there is a place for us to cry out our honest questions to God. "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?"

Habakkuk's world does not make sense. God is good, and God is at work in the world – Habakkuk believes this – but the world is not good. And one of the beautiful things about Habakkuk's story is that God answers him – but the answer makes things worse. God says that He will punish the unjust, but He will do so using the Babylonians, who are even worse than the people they're punishing. What sort of justice is this? How does this prove God right? Habakkuk resolves to "stand at [his] watch" to see how the Lord replies. And once again, God responds, and He gives Habakkuk one of the most beautiful, enduring statements in the Bible: "the righteous person will live by faith." It's not a statement that we should "just believe" in something we can't see in spite of all evidence to the contrary, it's the reminder that faithfulness is life for God's people, that no matter what happens, it is in that consistency of commitment to God that we find life. And with that established, God then assures Habakkuk that the proud will be dealt with. There will be accountability. Arrogance, greed, and injustice will not have the final word.

Habakkuk is only one example in the Bible of God's people struggling to understand their times, but Habakkuk is consistent with the call to remain faithful to God's methods regardless of the circumstances. No matter what the world is doing, we continue to love and work for justice and hope for all. We could point to many other examples in a wide variety of political situations through history. King David, a man after God's own heart, perhaps the godliest political leader ever, committed adultery and conspired to murder. The prophet Nathan then accuses him of being a man who has everything who nonetheless takes what little a poorer man has. God's justice does not bow to human power or expedience. The prophet speaks the truth to the king, and accuses him on behalf of the one with no voice. King Jehoiakim, in a time of national crisis, defiantly burned the writings of the prophet Jeremiah because they were not politically acceptable, but Jeremiah nonetheless was willing to continue preaching the truth of God in the face of the political preferences of his time. The Apostle Paul, living under Roman rule that was at times hostile to Christians, reminded his congregations that

God was still in charge and they should recognize that non-Christian governments are capable of bringing order to the world, but that submission to the government is grounded in love, and we overcome the evils of the world through love. The Apostle Peter, writing later when the Romans were even more hostile to Christians, echoes the same sentiment: we practice love, not retreat or rebellion. John the Revelator, writing even later when Christians were dying at the hands of the Romans, reveals the oftentimes demonic nature of the world's powers, but nonetheless reminds us that the weapons of God's people are things like prayer, suffering, worship, and self-giving love. The principle is that we have faith in God and His goodness and power, and therefore we *always* show love that works itself out through justice, mercy, and grace.

Recently in our Sunday school discussions we've been talking about grace and by extension the effects of legalism, realizing that we all struggle sometimes with that temptation to gracelessness and define our righteousness by external standards defined by humans, rather than by the indwelling power and presence of the living God. In our own denomination's history we've struggled with some forms of legalism, but something that Pastor Carey pointed out to me is that one of the motives for that legalism was to avoid the appearance of evil. For example, the rule was that we didn't play cards, not because the cards themselves were evil, but because we were concerned enough with our witness to our neighbors that we didn't want to risk them thinking we were gambling. Likewise with drinking alcohol: drinking is not always sinful, but to avoid the appearance of drunkenness, the decision was to completely abstain. We have it in our heritage to be aware of the perceptions and responses of our neighbors even if those perceptions are not accurate.

After this presidential election, we as theologically conservative Christians need to be aware of the perceptions and responses of our neighbors. I know that no one here harbors hate in their heart toward others. I know that no one here would paint a swastika on a wall or tell a stranger to go back to Africa. But in the eyes of so many of our neighbors, we are guilty by association with those who do such things. Right or wrong, as a generally conservative Protestant Christian denomination, we are seen as being a key part of president-elect Trump's support and by implication the ungodly parts of his campaign. What do we do now as Christians in these divided times?

Today I'm going to address us as one homogenous, unified group of Christians and voters, which is neither accurate nor fair, but it is in some sense true. It is true because it is how we are often viewed by our neighbors, and the message of Christ has never been about just me and my relationship with God, it has always also included my relationship with my neighbor, my enemy, and the world God created. Regardless of how you voted and your motivations in doing so, the reality is that we as a group have been defined by pollsters and pundits and many of our neighbors as being a part of that evangelical Christian voting bloc. The assumption many of our neighbors will have about us is that we are in at least some measure responsible for or complicit in the results of this election. Many Christians would not vote for Hillary Clinton because they did not want to feel complicit in the abortions that would take place under her administration: I wonder how many of those Christians are

willing to shoulder any blame for the racist, homophobic, and sexist sentiments that have been stoked by Mr. Trump's rhetoric? So the question before us is this: how now will we show love?

Many of us have publicly made it a priority to preserve our religious freedoms, and our other freedoms, whether they are freedom of speech or gun rights or whatever else. Our president-elect rode a wave of populism and nationalism, calling for the deportation of some of our neighbors and the explicit call to care about America first. Though he has since hedged, he made it a major point of his campaign to track Muslims within our borders and institute a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." So we have shown our neighbors that we care about ourselves and our own rights, but that our views on religious freedom are not universal. What will we do to show them we care about their rights? How will we show them love, when many of our neighbors – and I could give you names of some of the people in our community right now who are afraid and confused; this is not a hypothetical – how will we show them love when they are afraid for their safety and their futures? Right or wrong, correct or incorrect, some of our neighbors think we have voted to tell them that our rights count more than theirs, and they are not welcome in our society and they do not have a place among us. Whether they are correct is irrelevant. How will we show them love?

Many of us have publicly made it a priority to stand for what we call traditional, biblical views of marriage, and in doing so we have elected a man who has admitted to sexual assault – let's call it what it is; we are Christians, we speak the truth – and who has publicly bragged of extramarital affairs and has never repented. We have justified this by saying that while his character may be problematic, it's his policies that matter. So how will we now show our world that we truly value the meaning of biblical marriage and the value of every human being, whether they are man or woman, whether they look like a Miss Universe contestant or whether they are overweight and would be ranked as a 1 or 2? How will we tell our daughters and granddaughters that they are bearers of the image of God and that they are called and empowered to fully participate in the life of God's community, that they are invited to be full heirs of the inheritance of Christ, that they are welcome to receive the full outpouring and indwelling of God's Spirit, and that they are not merely valuable as a recipient of a man's lust? How will we tell that to our sons and grandsons, and teach them that under no circumstances is it acceptable to treat other people as pieces of meat or sexual objects? How will we show our world the beauty of God's intent for marriage and intimacy, rather than viewing it as a means of exercising power over another or a way to satisfy your own basest desires?

To those in the LGBT community, many of whom are afraid for their safety or are worried about being fully included in our society, will we tell them that their fears are simply invalid, that they should just stop being afraid in spite of their experiences, that their stories do not matter and did not happen? To those who are worried about family members and friends being deported, will we tell them that their fears are their own fault, and they just have it coming to them? To the minorities in our society who see our choices as a deliberate rejection of the first black president, will we tell them

that yes, when it comes down to it, we're afraid that our culture is changing and we want to make sure we keep our slice of the pie at your expense? How will we show them love when we supported a candidate endorsed by leaders of the KKK? It doesn't matter that he didn't embrace them; they saw enough of themselves in him that they were able to embrace him. How now can we show them love?

Toward those who view us as voting to strike a blow against "political correctness," how will we use our words to show grace and peace and love? Like it or not, "political correctness" is often an attempt to give dignity and humanity to people, and by voting against it we are seen as not considering those people worth taking the time to value or learn their language. We are Christians, for crying out loud: one of our most powerful descriptions of our Lord is as the Word. The gospel is a message, an announcement, a bundle of words. We take words seriously because we believe they have incredible power. They can be used to bind up the brokenhearted or they can inflict new wounds. They can bring light to the lost or they can dehumanize and categorize and diminish. We of all people believe in the power of words. So how will we use our words? Will we use our words to give redemptive humanity to others, or will we use our words to put them in their place? Will we cling to the dehumanizing and frankly demonic names we have for people we don't like or agree with, the racial epithets and the jokes and the half-baked "news" stories from who-knows-where that get passed around on Facebook? Or will we remember the power of our words and wield them carefully? How will we use our words to show love?

Many of us have publicly made it a priority to vote for what we hope is the "pro-life" option in this election, with "pro-life" being narrowly defined as opposing abortion. And so we have elected someone who has advocated the bombing of civilians in the Middle East – "when you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families" – which would be a war crime, and who said that waterboarding isn't "tough enough" and sees torture as a sign of strength. And some might be tempted to say that they don't matter because they're terrorists. So I would remind us of the refrain that some of us are so fond of repeating: "All lives matter." We have elected someone who intends to do everything within his power to undo the Paris agreement on climate change, which was signed by 193 countries and is intended to mitigate the effects of climate change. Is that a pro-life issue? It is if you realize that the poor around the world will be the first to feel the effects of climate change and are least able to cope, and so they will die. How will we show love to those who sense our hypocrisy on the question of life?

To those on the other side of the political spectrum – and yes, I know there are some among us, and yes, it is possible to be a Christian and vote for the other side – to you I ask the same question, because the question is always the same for God's people: how will you show love? How will you show love when you are afraid and angry? How will you show love to those who may indeed not value your presence in our community? The temptation for those who are victorious is to revel in their victory and show no concern for those who have lost, and the temptation for those who have lost is to give in to fear, anger, and despair. How will you show love?

Love is not passive. Love is not weak. Love is not giving up. Love is not doing nothing. Love seeks out the lost and hurting, and through the giving of one's self it seeks to restore and redeem. Love even seeks out the enemy and through hard work, through sacrifice, through struggle, invites the enemy to be transformed into a brother or sister. Love does not begin by making sure I get to say my peace and prove how right I am and wrong you are, love begins with the other. Love is not motionless, it is not pliant or docile; it is transformative. Love gets organized, love plans to love, love finds new and creative ways to love, love does not wait to be asked or wait for the crisis. How will we show love? Our God is good: we have nothing to fear and no reason not to love.

And if you are tempted to respond to this message by saying, "But what about..." If you're tempted to respond by moving some responsibility to the other side, or by justifying your previous choices, or exonerating yourself of some of the gospel duties I have laid upon you, I say this: *don't*. Just don't. I hope I've convinced you before now that I value your doubts and questions, and under normal circumstances I invite you to come back at me and help me wrestle with the implications of the gospel. But today, don't. The only appropriate response to this message is to answer the question: how will you show love? Don't evade answering the question. Right or wrong, millions of our neighbors today are afraid and angry, and to many of them, rather than being a place of hope and grace, the church is complicit in the cause of their fear. It doesn't matter if they're justified or not. No, it really doesn't. The question for us is not how we can prove them wrong, the question is how we can show them love.

I was tempted to joke, at the conclusion of this sermon, that I'll be placing a box at the back of the sanctuary for those of you who wish to leave me angry letters calling for my resignation, but I will not apologize for asking us how we will show love to our neighbors. I don't ask on my own authority, I ask on the authority of Jesus Christ, who is our King, and who commands it. To be honest, I don't care if you agree with my analysis, or with the assumptions placed on us by those on the outside. It doesn't matter. How will you show love?



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