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Speaker: Shane Simms, Multi-Site Pastor
Scripture: Habakkuk

My family and I have now lived in the city of London, Ontario for three years; starting year four this year. And we love this place. A little test for you; how well do you know our city? This is a pic of a major intersection—this is Victoria hospital, and this is Commissioners; does anyone know what this road is named? For me, the first time, and now every time I go down Wellington Road, I am given a very solid reminder of a part of my story that has affected me very deeply. You might think, “How does Wellington Road connect with you? That sounds strange.” Well, when I look at the road sign and see “Wellington Road”, I am caused to think of a person in my life who has had a profound effect on me. You see, Wellington, is the name of my dad—Wellington Simms.

Growing up, my dad was the only person in my house who went to church. My mom was at a different place in her understanding of faith back then and my dad was not the kind of person to force his faith on us. So, for the most part, my dad went to church alone on Sundays, and the rest of our family just did our own thing.

I remember one Sunday at our dinner table, maybe in a moment of frustration or despair, my dad said, “I don’t want a whole lot in life, just that my family would go to church with me”. And to be honest, I don’t think anybody else in my family thought that would ever happen. I certainly didn’t think it would ever happen. It was definitely the last place in my life I ever wanted to be. And you know how God works—it’s the place I have spent all of my adult life, and loved it.

To make a long story short, through a crazy series of events that are on North Park’s website in a sermon I preached here called, *God on the Harbourfront*, I became a Christian, and of all things, end up moving to Ontario to go to Bible College. Yes, the guy who never did the “church thing” growing up, and never thought the church would be part of his story, was somehow prayed into being a pastor by his dad.

That is when I thought all the stars would align. I was living my life right. I became a Christian, felt God’s call on my life, was now on track to eventually be a pastor ... and I knew that God was proud of me, and I knew that Wellington was proud of me. Everything will now work out—it has to.

Doesn’t it?

I was in bible school for four months. My dear Ethiopian roommate, who was new to Canada, was adopting my Newfoundland accent as he learned English, which was quite the interesting combination of accents. And one night, as he and I, the unlikely couple, are sitting around our dorm room, our room telephone rang, and it was my folks in Newfoundland.

Of course, phone calls from home were normal—just a couple of proud parents, and certainly a proud Wellington, calling to see how their boy was doing in Bible School. And all, I remember are these words from my mom, “Shanie [and none of you can call me that; only my mom can call me that], “Shanie, your dad got some bad news from the doctor today. He has what they are calling a rare neurological illness, and they are giving him a window of five years to live. But everything is going to be OK.”

And that's all I remember about the phone call. I remember dropping the phone, and in my immaturity and anger and shock I punched a couple walls and maybe flipped a piece of furniture or two. I was freaking out—I didn't have the "peace of God that passes all understanding." Mom said everything was going to be OK. But, the information she gave me didn't sound OK. Wellington was only 49 years old.

After I was done freaking out, my Ethiopian roommate, Ermias, who simply sat on his bed and watched me fly through my tantrum, looked me square in the face, and in his normal humble, godly, soft, quiet demeanor, said, "OK Shane, we pray..."

It was the first ever, "Why God, why?" moment of my walk with Jesus. It was the first, "If you're supposed to be in control and you're a good God, why is this happening?" kind of moment. We'll come back to that moment a little later today.

Here at North Park, we are in this series called, *Majoring on the Minors*. The Minor prophets are called that because the books in scripture they wrote are shorter than some of the others, but these minor prophets dealt with some major issues, and some of them had some major issues.

The first major issue with today's minor prophet is his name. Let's deal with that right from the start. His name is Habakkuk, or Habakkuk. I don't know how to pronounce it; a few of us have been bouncing it around in the office this week. But, however the English pronounces, and I am just going to pick one and stay with it, his name comes from the Hebrew which means to embrace, or to wrestle, which makes a lot of sense when we see what his book is about.

This book is one of 12 minor prophets. If you go to Matthew (first book in the New Testament), and back up five books, you'll land on a pretty hot mess of a book, called Habakkuk. Prophets are odd kinds of people. In today's culture, if someone comes up to you and tells you they are a prophet, you are

probably going to drop your stuff and run in the other direction. As much as prophets were strange, unconventional kind of people, Habakkuk was more different even than them.

Here is the lowdown with how Old Testament prophets usually work. This is how prophets would communicate—before Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. 😊

A prophet would hear a message from God and come back and tell the people what God had said. That's what they learned in "prophet school;" that's how it worked. 😊

Habakkuk is a prophet, who is primarily telling God what he thought, what he felt about people and God's methods in dealing with these people. He wasn't as much into listening to God's perspective and sharing that.

So, to recap, most Old Testament prophets hear from God and tell the people. Habakkuk talks to God about what he has heard from people and what he thinks God should do about it.

So, here is what is happening in Habakkuk's book at 30,000 feet.

Habakkuk sees lots of problems around him. He sees lots of social injustice and idolatry. He sees corruption on all the different levels of society: politically, culturally, religiously, his people and his country are off the rails and it seems like nobody cares. But really, if there is anyone who is supposed to care about this, who would that person be? Should the prophet be the one who cares? That is not the prophet's take here—he thinks that the one who should care is the one who doesn't care at all.

Habakkuk doesn't start his book with, "Dear Jesus, you are so awesome!" He doesn't even jump in with a polite, "To Whom It May Concern." Here is how it starts:

*"How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"*

³ *Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?*

Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴ *Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.*

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.” (Hab. 1:2-4)

So, there’s no prophet here telling the people what he has heard from God. No, we have a mad, confused, angry prophet, saying, “How long God ... when God? ... why God?” This is good news for me, because this means that I, and you, were not the first or the only people to ever ask these kinds of things. That’s great news! When I get to heaven, I’ll at least get an invitation to Habakkuk’s place for dinner, if nowhere else....

This prophet “takes a go” at God and lays out some hefty charges...

Hey God, why don’t you listen?

Hey God, why don’t you rescue?

Hey God, why do you force me to see social problems?

Hey God, why do you tolerate stuff I don’t tolerate?

Hey God, because you don’t act, wicked people just keep doing wicked things.

Habakkuk was the “*Why God, why?*” prophet. And the amazing thing is, *God actually responds* to Habakkuk’s list of things that God should apparently be doing that God is apparently not currently doing.

Watch this; this gets crazier! So, obviously God sees Habakkuk’s logic after all. Habakkuk is a prophet, and now God sees the error of his ways and decides to do things the right way, right? Wrong.

God responds:

“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed.

For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth...

They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. They mock kings and scoff at rulers. Then they sweep past like the wind and go on— guilty people, whose own strength is their god.” (Hab. 1:5-11 selected)

So I’m sure this is not the way God processed it, but let’s say that it was, “OK Habakkuk, you’ve got a point. I had better get to work on these problems; thanks for bringing them to my attention.” But, the kicker, the twist, for God to fix these problems, God decides he is going to raise up one of Israel’s sworn enemies to drive Israel into exile and teach them a lesson. God decides he is going to raise up the Babylonian enemy, get them to come in, do a number on the people and the land, drive them out, and teach the Jews a lesson.

Catch this—this would be the modern-day equivalent of God raising up Al Qaeda to invade Canada, push out all the Christians and scatter them all across the world to teach them a lesson about straying from the ways of God. That is the modern-day equivalent of what was happening here. We would take exemption to this, right? Probably. Habakkuk did too ... so he takes another go at God. Here we go again ... round two.

Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die. You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish.

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (Hab. 1:12-13)

I love this minor prophet with major attitude! When God announces that he is going to act, he is just going to do it in a way that Habakkuk doesn’t agree

with, Habakkuk reminds God of who He is to see if that will convince God to change his mind.

“Don’t forget God, you’re eternal, and you’ve always been around. You know better than this ... you can’t follow through on this plan, because those Babylonians are evil, just in case you’ve forgotten—bad people, really bad people.”

Sometimes our theological arguments with God won’t be good enough for God to see the “path of our proper reasoning” and change his mind. And then Habakkuk throws the accusation of silence out there: “God, why are you silent while all this goes on...?” Have you ever said this to God? If you haven’t yet, you probably will, or at least you will feel it.

It is interesting how God deals with Habakkuk on his silence accusation. In chapter 2, God lays out the plan of what He is going to do, how he is going to do it, and what it is going to look like. He is going to “fix the problem in Israel” with all the corruption; he is going to discipline the people, just like Habakkuk wanted, but he is going to use a terror regime to do it, which is not just like Habakkuk wanted. Chapter 2 lays the whole thing out. And then God addresses Habakkuk’s accusation of silence.

At the end of God’s plan and God’s reasoning (which he doesn’t have to give to anyone, even if you do claim to be a prophet), God declares this:

“The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth be silent before him.”

God addresses the **accusation** of silence with the **demand** for silence. God says, “I am not silent. You just don’t get it. Now you be silent, and trust, and watch what I am going to do.” Don’t you love that!?!

That’s the difference between God sitting on the throne in heaven and us sitting on the couch in the living room.

Five years past my phone call in my bible college dorm room, Yvonne (my wife) and I and our 30-pound cat named Ralph are hanging out in our apartment in Hamilton where I was at McMaster working on my Master’s degree.

My phone rang, again. It was a friend named Jason. Jason was also a staff pastor at my home church back in NL. “Shane, I don’t know how to tell you this, but your whole family is here at the hospital. Your dad just died Shane. I’m really sorry. I don’t know what to say. Man, I’m really sorry.”

My dad, Wellington Simms, was 54 years old. And, I was an angry, broken prophet. I can’t remember exactly how everything rolled out next. I got on a plane, I went back to my hometown, I basically planned and carried out a funeral. I preached the sermon and can’t remember what I said. I held my mother up from crashing face first into the ground as she peered in over her husband’s open grave.

And, there were lots of, “Why God, why?” questions. There are still lots of, “Why God, why?” questions. Every time I turn North or South on Wellington Road, I take a deep breath because I realize I’m more like Habakkuk than I think.

Now God, remember, you are good, so you are not supposed to let good people, especially Christian people, die young.

Now God, if you are going to do this the right way, you are supposed to let the man who prayed his whole life for his family to be in the church to at least live long enough to see his son finish seminary and preach his first sermon.

Now God, you know that you are going to cause this widow to have a deep crisis of faith and you are going to cause the children in this family to be wounded in a way they will never fully recover from and you are going to cause lots of grandkids to never be able to know their grandfather, so God, you should do things this way.

And, all my theological reminders to God of who God is never changed what happened. But I have learned something. I think that when God responded to Habakkuk's charge of "Why do you just sit there and let this happen?" with, "The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him," there was a little rebuke in there ... but there was also a lot of trust and faith and hope.

I think it was a lot of, "You're not going to understand. I've got this. I've got you. Trust me." I think it was a lot of, "Habakkuk, you're not going to get this, but I am in My holy temple, and you are not, and I've got this." I think this is a lot of "Shanie [God can call me that, but just God and mom], you have no clue why that was the road that happened, but I've got this, and you just need to be still and trust me..."

There's this component of being silent, being filled with trust, hope, and faith that the God who sits on that throne is in the house. The God of Israel, who never slumbers nor sleeps, is in control, and there are so many times that he just wants us to recognize his sovereignty ... and breathe in, and breathe out ... and breathe in, and breathe out ... and breathe in, and breathe out ... because the Lord still is, and always will be, in his holy temple.

And hey, the minor prophet, had major questions, and that's OK. We will have major questions too; it's a part of the journey. God isn't afraid of those questions—ask them. But don't be shocked when his response is, "The Lord is in his holy temple. Just be silent and trust me."

All I want to say to you this weekend is this: God is in his holy temple; be restful and practise silence before him. He's got this, he's got you, he's got whatever it is, even when it doesn't turn out the way that it ought to. The Lord is in his holy temple. The Lord who watches over Israel never slumbers, never sleeps, is always awake, always sees, always cares. He says to us, "Be still and know that I am God."

So, keep the faith, keep trusting, give it to him—even and especially when it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Sometimes, our lessons on perspective can be hard but he is God, and we are not. He is in his holy temple, and we can't always see or hear that he is at work, so we must be still, and be silent, and trust.

Find a peaceful place to go and trust God in the silence. I think I will probably take some time today and go for a drive down Wellington Road.

Let's pray.

Points to Ponder

Majoring on the Minors ~ Habakkuk

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Habakkuk saw that there were great social injustices around him, and he was angry and confused as to why God didn't step in. Have you ever struggled over this same issue with God?
2. Habakkuk was also confused/upset when he learned that God's ways of fixing these "social ills" were not the ways he would have chosen. Have you ever been at odds with God's chosen means of activity in the world?
3. At one point, God told Habakkuk that he had things under control and Habakkuk's posture was simply to trust that God was "in his holy temple." What things have you had to just be silent" about, trusting God was in control even when it didn't really seem like it?

Prayer

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed.