

Good Friday Tenebrae Vespers C, 2013

Text: Habakkuk 3:2-19

Title: From Silence to Joy

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

Those words stare back at you every time you enter this church. Where do they come from? And what do they have to say to us on Good Friday?

The first question is an easy one. These words are from Habakkuk 2:20, the last verse of Habakkuk chapter 2.

Habakkuk is a very small book in the Old Testament, one of the twelve, so-called “minor” prophets. It’s a tiny little book, only three chapters long, a grand total of 56 verses. When you go home tonight, before you go to bed, read the book of Habakkuk, the entire thing. It will probably take you longer to find the book in your Bible than it will to read it.

If you do, you will see that this verse comes at the end of a conversation between God and Habakkuk.

The book of Habakkuk goes like this: Habakkuk says something; God responds; Habakkuk says something else, and God responds a second time. It’s a conversation.

The book begins with a complaint by Habakkuk. Habakkuk is frustrated and he’s frustrated at God. He doesn’t think God is hearing his prayers. He doesn’t think God even cares about His people any more.

“How long?” asks Habakkuk.

“How long do I have to pray, O Lord, before you answer me?”

“How long do I have to watch as the world is filled with violence and conflict, wars and gang violence, senseless shootings and terrorist attacks?” How long do I have to watch the poor and the weak taken advantage of by the rich and powerful?”

That’s Habakkuk’s first complaint. “Aren’t you going to do something, God?”

And we can sympathize with Habakkuk. Our world is very similar to his. And sometimes we wonder if God really hears our prayers, if God really cares for us or for those who suffer.

Now the Lord actually answers Habakkuk’s complaint. Here’s what the Lord says,

“I’m going to do something alright, just watch me. I am going to raise up the Babylonians who will sweep down into your land and destroy Israel. I will bring my wrath and retribution on those who are in power, and that will solve your problem of evil and violence.

Now this probably isn’t the answer the Habakkuk is looking for. He wants the wicked to be punished, for sure, but what God is talking about is a total destruction of the entire country, foreign invaders taking over their land. Is that really fair? And aren’t the Babylonians wicked, too?

God answers Habakkuk a second time. He says all the wicked will be punished. None will escape His judgment.

But the righteous will live by faith. Those who are just will trust in the Lord to make all things right, they will trust in Him to sort everything out.

That is all that we can do for now, live by faith. Trust that God will make all things right in the end.

Right now it doesn’t seem like things are fair. It doesn’t seem like God is just, especially when you look at the cross. How was that just and right and fair? The death of Jesus was the most unfair thing to ever happen in the history of the world. Jesus was innocent of everything, not one single fault, not even a parking ticket. And yet Jesus dies so that you can live.

Does Jesus complain? Does He call for God to punish those who crucified Him? No. He could have, but He accepts God’s will, and is silent before Him.

God’s answer to Habakkuk’s second complaint ends with this verse, “The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”

God’s answer to Habakkuk is to watch and wait. Wait for God to act. Wait for Him to sort everything out. Be silent and trust in the Lord.

For thousands of years God’s people and watched and waited. Sometimes, like Habakkuk, they complained. Other times they were just silent.

God was not far away. God was not up in heaven not caring about His people. He was there with them in His temple. He was dwelling in the midst of His people, He saw everything that was going on, He was waiting for the time to be right.

And then, finally, God came. God came to defeat the powers of evil and darkness. God came to put an end to violence and suffering. God came in the person of Jesus Christ, and He won the victory through His death on the cross.

And that’s what Habakkuk 3 is all about. Habakkuk ends with a hymn of praise to God for coming to defeat His enemies and rescue His people.

Habakkuk pictures God coming down from the mountains in wrath and power, with flashes of lightning and plagues. God coming to judge the earth.

That's a fearful thing. It's not a peaceful, pleasant picture. But that is what judgment day will look like.

But when that day comes, you need not fear, you need not worry. Instead that will be a day of rejoicing for you.

We will sing the refrain. "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation." "The God of my salvation," is what the name "Jesus" means. When St. Jerome translated the Old Testament into Latin, he translated this phrase "exultabo in Deo Iesu meo." I will exult in Jesus, my God.

God saves through Jesus Christ, and that's a reason to rejoice, even in the midst of the darkness and in the shadow of the cross. We sing tonight in defiance of the forces of evil and violence that surrounds us. Nothing will silence us. God has acted, now it's time to sing.

Tonight is a night to rejoice and praise God, because of what Jesus has done. You do not need to fear God's wrath and punishment. When God comes, your enemies will be destroyed once and for all. He will put an end to senseless violence and all those things we complain about.

On that day you will be saved because of what Jesus has done for you. He has taken the wrath of God upon Himself. Jesus became God's enemy for you. Jesus was brought low that you might be lifted up, that your feet might become like the deer's, climbing up to the heights of the mountains.

So the first thing for us to do is be silent, watch and wait for the Lord to act.

But then our response after He acts is to sing songs of praise. It may seem odd to sing this way on Good Friday, but it is Good Friday after all, good because of what Jesus has done for you.

"The Lord is in His Holy Temple, let all the earth be silent before Him." That's a fine reminder as we begin our service every week, to be silent, to watch and wait and listen to the Lord.

But then after we have heard and experienced God's salvation, "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation."

Perhaps we should be that up on the back wall to greet us as we go out into a violent, evil world, knowing that we face all these things with joy, knowing that through the cross, Jesus has saved us.