ROOM MUST BE GIVEN FOR HOPE

HABAKKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4; LUKE 19:1–10
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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The title for my sermon this morning comes from what might perhaps be considered a strange source for a Mennonite pastor.

John Calvin ☺.

For those not familiar with the name, John Calvin was a contemporary of Martin Luther and Menno Simons in the sixteenth century and is kind of the father of Reformed theology.

Rightly or wrongly, Calvin is often associated with a rather angry and severe form of systematic theology where God is basically a puppet master pulling the strings for his people and his world in a cosmic story where nothing happens (good or evil) that he doesn't specifically ordain, where freedom is an illusion, where God decided who is saved and who is damned and where the game has been fixed from the start.

That's a crude caricature—and it must be said that Calvin*ism* is often quite a bit more severe than John Calvin himself ever was—but this is how the word Calvin sometimes functions in theological discourse.

So, you can see why he might not be the most obvious voice for a Mennonite to gravitate toward. ☺ Mennonites are notorious for their *lack* of systematic theology, for their, "Well, just read the gospels and do what Jesus said" approach.

This, too, is a caricature, but Mennonites in general are not renowned for the theological gymnastics of our Protestant brothers and sisters. And at our best we try to keep the character of God revealed in Christ central—if a theological doctrine seems difficult to square with the character of Jesus, well, so much the worse for the doctrine.

Anyway, back to Calvin. Commenting on the passage from Habakkuk that was read earlier, Calvin says:

> This is a remarkable passage; for we are taught here that we are not to deal with God in too limited a manner, ***but room must be given for hope***.[1]

I want to orient my sermon this morning around this line from Calvin.

Room must be given for hope.

I want to do it in two parts. First, I want to look at the big picture – the macro view, as it were. Then, I want to drop down to the smaller picture of our own lives. We're going to do this through the lens of our two readings this morning.

We begin with the big picture in Habakkuk.

Habakkuk was a prophet who wrote to the people of Judah around 612-599 BC.

Habakkuk looks around at his own people and sees injustice, inequality, wickedness, and violence. He looks around and sees the people of God looking like anything but.

And he complains about this to God.

The sense of grievance and outrage drip off Habakkuk's pen…

> 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.

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[1] Bryan Spinks, "Theological Perspective on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 246.

The words could as easily be a response to the news of the day in the twenty-first century as they are to the realities faced by the people of Jerusalem six hundred years before the time of Christ!

I thought about making a list of current events that would fit each of Habakkuk's complaints here, but I quickly realized that this probably wasn't necessary. All we have to do is open a paper or a news website and we'll find plenty of evidence.

And our response to all this (and more) is as natural as Habakkuk's.

How long? Why do you tolerate this, God? Why don't you listen to our cries?

It's important to note that this is a *human* response to evil and injustice, not just a religious or a Christian one.

I spent my master's thesis researching the angry and strident atheism of the early 2000's. In the end, my argument was that the whole phenomenon of angry atheism was a kind of incoherent protest against the very God they claimed to reject.

Over and over again, these writers would talk about how there couldn't possibly be a God because religious people were so terrible, because the world was a terrible place, because nature was violent. How could there be a God if the world is so bad? If God was so good, why wouldn't he do anything to help?

And yet the very *possibility* of complaint requires convictions both that things should be better than they are and that someone exists who can make them better than they are.

This is the basis for any complaint, any lament.

My teenagers have been known (on *exceedingly* rare occasions) to complain about the way things are arranged in their lives, the restrictions that are imposed them, etc.

It would make little sense for them to complain if they didn't have at least some sense that things ought to be better for them than their present experience.

It would also make little sense to complain if they didn't have the belief that their parents had the capacity to *make* things better for them, to alter their circumstances somehow.

It should be added—very hastily, as a parent ☺—that not *every* complaint is legitimate. Or at least not *as* legitimate. Not every complaint has the same merit, whether with human parents or with God.

Sometimes we complain to God about things that are bad or inconvenient while failing to acknowledge that we are part of the problem. Sometimes we are blind to how God might be using something hard to forge our character or to draw us closer to him.

We don't always see clearly, it must be said.

But in general, it makes no sense to complain without without the assumption that things *could* be and *should* be better than they are. And that the one we are complaining *to* has the capacity to effect these changes.

As one commentator put it,

> The paradox of lament is that there is no lament without a foundation of faith. Grief, sorrow, despair can all exist alongside a void of faith, but argumentative lament presupposes that Someone is listening.[2]

In Habakkuk, the prophet's complaint about the state of affairs of his people is met with what appears to be worse news yet.

God responds by essentially saying that he's sending the Babylonians to "handle the matter of Judah's injustice – small comfort since the Babylonians are more violent yet!

But God also reminds Habakkuk that the day is coming when the world Habakkuk longs for will be a reality:

> If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

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[2] Pamela Cooper-White, "Pastoral Perspective on Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4," in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 243-44.

> Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

And while the book of Habakkuk begins with complaint, but it ends with one of the most marvelous and poetic expressions of determined hope in all of Scripture:

> 17 Though the fig tree does not bud
> and there are no grapes on the vines,
> though the olive crop fails
> and the fields produce no food,
> though there are no sheep in the pen
> and no cattle in the stalls,
> 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
> I will be joyful in God my Savior.
> 19 The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
> he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
> he enables me to tread on the heights.

In the Bible, complaint or lament nearly always comes with an "and yet" attached to it. It always leads to a renewed determination to hope in God.

A God who promises a hopeful future is the very ground upon which complaint against injustice is built upon, without which all our protests would be incoherent.

Room must always be given for hope.

Scripture does something else with the complaint against injustice.

It honours complaint as legitimate, it directs us toward the peaceable kingdom, a new heaven and a new earth where every tear is wiped away, where death itself is defeated.

But it also holds up a mirror before us. We are never allowed to just complain about the world *out there* without looking *in here*.

For every, "How long, O Lord?" there is a "What about you?" For every, "Why, God?" there is a personal summons to be a participant in the coming kingdom, one small way in which God is making all things new.

We are never allowed to keep problems of evil and injustice at an abstract and theoretical level where we can just complain about them to God and look longingly to a future hope where these wrongs will be righted.

So, from the macro we move down the micro. From the vast and familiar canopy of global injustice we move to a single human story.

It's a familiar story and a familiar character. Zacchaeus.

The wee little man who climbed up the sycamore tree to get a better look

Six hundred or so years after Habakkuk complained about the flourishing of injustice and the prominence of wrongdoing, his people had substituted one oppressive empire to rule over them for another.

Babylon had come and gone. Now, the Romans had their boots on the people of Israel's neck.

And the Romans couldn't always be bothered to gather their own taxes from the various people groups they had as subjects. So they conscripted some Jews to gather some of their lower levels of tax.

Jews like Zacchaeus.

And these tax collectors almost always skimmed a bit off the top for themselves. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, our text says, and nobody in Jericho would have had much doubt about where his wealth had come from. It had come from *them*.

So he was a thief and a traitor—a collaborator with the hated Romans. He was in the eyes of nearly all, a *sinner*.

Which makes him the most likely candidate for an encounter with Jesus. Because whether it was a Samaritan woman at a well, a Roman centurion with a dying servant, a leper outside the city gates, a woman caught in adultery about to be stoned by zealously righteous men, Jesus was *always* drawn to sinners.

We don’t know what Jesus said to Zacchaeus. Did he confront him about his shady “business practices?” Did he ask about his childhood? Did he ask him what it was like to be short? Did he ask him where he learned to climb a tree like that? Did he ask him why he was so curious?

I wish Luke would give us a few more details, but he doesn’t. So all we can infer is that whatever happened in this meeting, Zacchaeus’s life was turned around by an encounter with Jesus.

And, of course, Zacchaeus famously responds with the truest form of repentance. He changes his life and promises to right all those he has wronged.

Zacchaeus could have taken refuge in abstract complaints about the way the world was. What could he do? The Romans were powerful and persuasive? And about skimming of the top? Everyone knew that this is just how the system works. He didn’t start it, he didn’t make the rules. He was just trying to get by, after all. You gotta look out for yourself in this world because God knows nobody else will look out for you. Yeah, it wasn’t fun being hated and mocked, but, again, that’s just the world we live in.

Zacchaeus could have just resigned himself to the way things were and continued to make excuses for his participation in unjust systems and selfish gain.

But he didn't. His encounter with Jesus changed everything. He probably knew that his repentance wasn’t going to change any of the big things that were wrong with the world.

But it would change one of the small things that contributed to the big injustices, namely, himself.

And so, a greedy, selfish tax-collector found himself giving away half his possessions in joyous response to encountering the king of peace, the lord of justice, the hope of nations.

To what I can only imagine was the absolute astonishment of everyone that he encountered from that point onward. You could hardly imagine a less likely candidate for the kind of kingdom turnaround that Zacchaeus demonstrated.

But room must always be given for hope.

In Habakkuk, the prophet interrogates God for the injustice he sees all around. God honours his lament and says, in effect. Just wait. What you are hoping for will surely come. Justice will be done. The righteous will live by faith.

In Luke, God, in Christ, interrogates Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus is set free from the life he was living, a life unworthy of the gospel

So, I think the word to us is a twofold one this morning

First, we can honestly bring our pain before God. Yesterday, a friend asked me what I was preaching about today, and I said, "complaining to God." They responded, "Well don't you mean something like 'lament?' I'm not sure 'complaining' is a good idea."

But why would be hide our true feelings from God? Why would we sanitize our language, our responses to wars stealing the lives of people, of people we love dying, of injustice thriving, of children dying and women being abused and the world generally being far less than it should be?

Our language of complaint bears forceful witness to our conviction that the world is less than it ought to be, that a better world is promised to us, and that we are called to be people of hope.

But second, with Zacchaeus we look honestly in the mirror held up to us by Jesus Christ. We refuse to be people who complain about the evil *out there* without looking honestly at what's going on *in here*, in our own lives.

We are not too proud to come down from the tree where we comfortably survey things in a detached way, and allow Christ to interrogate us, to consider what patterns of life *we* need to be set free from, that are unworthy of the kingdom of God.

And, we remember that room must always be given for hope.

Whether we look out at the world and see nothing but cause for despair or we look at our own lives or the lives of those we care about and find it difficult to imagine a better future.

Room must be given for hope.

When it comes to *this* story that we are a part of, and *this* God that we are believing and trusting and seeking—sometimes through clenched teeth—to follow, room must *always* be given for hope.

Amen.