

Rejoicing when Times Are Tough

Habakkuk 3:7-19

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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A friend told me that the pulpit at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville is constructed in the form of a phoenix.

The phoenix is an appropriate symbol for preaching. Preachers tell stories from the pulpit all the time about people rising from the figurative ashes to new life. The Hebrew people did it when they fled the slavery of Pharaoh into the freedom and responsibility of the promised land. A fire was kindled at a manger with the birth of Jesus. Saul, laid low on the road to Damascus, rose above the ashes of his life as a new, untimely born disciple of Jesus. We read in scripture about how God delivers people on the brink of destruction, people like Ruth, people like the Ninivites (much to Jonah's chagrin), people like that woman about to be stoned to death for allegedly committing adultery. Remember that scene? Jesus was there, and as the men in that tightening circle were ready to stone that woman to death, because, after all, they wanted to follow the law, Jesus calmly suggests that the man without sin cast the first stone.

God is in the delivery business, bringing people through the ashes to new life. Another word for this is resurrection.

As it turns out, the pulpit of the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville is not constructed in the form of phoenix. It's just an ordinary pulpit. But they should know a thing or two about God delivering God's people through the fire.

That church was built as First Presbyterian Church in 1814. It burned down in 1832. They rebuilt it that year. It burned down again in 1848. The present building, designed by Philadelphia architect William Strickland, rose from the ashes. It was used as a hospital during the Civil War. During the floods of 1927 and 1937, the church was a shelter for flood victims. Soldiers leaving for WWII from Nashville slept in the church by the thousands. In 1954, they voted to move to the suburbs. They did so; but they sold the church to members who didn't want to move. Instead of tearing the building down for parking lot, the building remained, and the people who remained were the church of Jesus Christ in it and in the world.

I imagine at some of these stress points in their history, many people thought they were done for. In 1832, some members, I'm sure, asked, "How can we survive a fire?" In 1848, standing on the ashes of a second fire, I imagine many church members (many of the very same ones?) asking, "How can we survive a second fire?" When the church became a shelter, did some people wonder if the pews would ever again be used for worshippers? Would we survive a world war? Can we still be a church when half of us leave for the suburbs, leaving only fewer of us behind?

But every Sunday a preacher climbs into that pulpit that is meant to remind us of a phoenix and shares good news. Good news is shared to a people who are still vexed by the troubles of the world. Good news rings like a bell every, single Sunday. God is present in the storm; isn't that what Veda Gill preached so winsomely last week? God is with us in the troubles: transforming us, redeeming us, using us, healing us to be healers. God loves and redeems the world. I am with you always even to the end of the age (Matthew 28). Be anxious about nothing, but with everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4).

Veda—dear Veda of the Presbyterian Education Board of Pakistan—bringing good news from the girls' schools in Pakistan quoted Isaiah 43:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

They stood on the stone steps of that decimated building in Nashville, steam hissing from the ashen timbers piled like Lincoln logs, and they held hands, and they stood with dejection, and they said, "We shall not overcome. It is hopeless and we are finished. We are burned down and burned out."

And, likewise, they stand in the ashes in Gaza and Ukraine and they say the wars will never end. We cannot survive. We are bereft and forgotten.

They stand in the cathedrals of once large, populous congregations that have grown as small as a single mustard seed and they lament to one another, words echoing through all that empty space, "It is finished for us. God cannot use our few and tired bones for good in the world anymore."

The widow says it over the grave of her beloved. The down-and-out say it as they lean into the wind blowing through the cold streets. The senior says it when her college applications are rejected. The eager young man believes he is worth nothing when he cannot land the job. And the sixty-year-old says it when he is right-sized from the company he's been faithful to for half of his working life, to say nothing of the woman who never has earned her full potential in a business world still oriented to men who know little of glass ceilings.

These dejected saints gather through the ages (are we? you? among that number?) and wring their hands and look around at the desolation of their lives, and they rightly have no hope. Why have hope when the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines? Why have hope when the olive harvest fails and the fields yield no food? How can we have hope when the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls?

This is what many in the churches of Cuba are saying. They stand on the ashes of a failed revolution. Like us, they are a broken people in need of God's grace, but unlike us, they are starving and there are no jobs in a ruined economy. They stand on the steps with the ground still hot from the consuming flames. Certainly, some in their beleaguered number are saying, "We are finished."

But from that crowd, somebody dares to speak up:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?
*The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?
*The Lord does not faint or grow weary;
God's understanding is unsearchable.*

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?
²⁹ *The Lord gives power to the faint
and strengthens the powerless.*

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?”

*³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted...*

*³¹ . . . those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

* * *

I sat in a warm pew at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville for a concert. Local, working Nashville musicians had come to our preachers' conference.

Beth Nielson Chapman was one of the artists. She told us of the death of her young husband to cancer. Then her own cancer scare. Then this song (2002), which, for her, rose from the ashes of her life:

*Every December sky must lose its faith in leaves
And dream of the spring inside the trees
How heavy the empty heart
How light the heart that's full
Sometimes, I have to trust what I can't know . . .*

(Imagine the second verse lifted by the harmonies of John Prine)

*We walk into paradise
The angels lend us shoes
'Cause all that we own
We'll come to lose
And heaven is not so far
Outside this womb of words
With every rose that blooms
My soul is assured
It's just like a song I've known
Yet still unheard . . .*

(2002, Every December Sky, from the album Deeper Still)

And what she was doing, this brilliant singer/songwriter, was standing on the last remaining stone steps of a burned down world. And standing there, she did the only thing she could do. She sang a song of hope. She pointed beyond the smoke and ruin, she closed her eyes, and she helped us all see the hope, the love, the life that she saw. And we saw. We saw it, too. Borrowing from the prophets of old, she made their words her own.

Christian Wiman, the poet at Yale who teaches literature and religion, said, “I believe the right response to reality is to scream.” But he also said, “I believe the right response to reality is to bow down” (The Christian Century, February 2024, *Christian Wiman's feel-bad memoir*, by Katherine Willis Pershey, pp 88-89).

Here in Habakkuk, we find the prophet surrounded by the enemy. He is bowed down upon and looking up from the battlements.

“For Habakkuk, that enemy was an army at the city gates,” writes Anna Carter Florence. *“For us the same could be true, and in many places is. Or the enemy could be inside the city gates—forces at work among us and between us, seen and unseen. The addiction to wealth and power at all costs, for example. Or white supremacy and other systemic injustices. Or the myth of scarcity that creates economic disparities between rich and poor. Or the greed*

that fuels our climate crisis and environmental destruction” (p. 36, A is for Alabaster, Anna Carter Florence, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2023).

From this desperate place, Habakkuk stands. Upon the wreckage of the world, watching the battles rage and rage, he sings a song about a hope in God that rises through the air thick with ash:

*⁷ Though the fig tree does not blossom
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer
and makes me tread upon the heights. (Habakkuk 3:7-19)*

God brings light in darkness, spring from the frozen clutches of winter, home to those who wander, joy for those who weep, even life from the ashes of death. So, “I will rejoice in the Lord. I will exult in the God of my salvation.”

Hallelu, hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah. Praise ye the Lord.

AMEN.