

Life: Habakkuk's message of faith

January 1, 2013

This LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series lesson for Jan. 13 focuses on Habakkuk 1:1-3, 5-6, 13; 2:1, 4-6; 3:1-2, 17-19.

As 2012 came to an end and the news agencies rehearsed the significant events of the year, it was startling to note a new category had been added to the list—mass shootings. We all are disturbed, even wounded ourselves, by the devastation and horror. It seems some new evil has been unleashed on us. Or, has it?

When we arrive at such moments and find our faith stretched almost to the breaking point, it helps to read the prophets. They remind us we are not the first people to have suffered at the hands of evil.

Neither are we the first people to ask of God: “‘How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing” (Habakkuk 1:2-3)? These words are centuries old and have been uttered in one way or another by every generation. We are not the first and we won’t be the last. Our children and grandchildren will someday utter them.

No one lives long without being inducted into the “brotherhood of the bereaved,” John Claypool once said. When unanswered bereavement visits us, especially the kind loosed by unfettered evil, it is easy to turn our face to God and puzzle over God’s apparent silence. We should take comfort in knowing even a man as faithful as the prophet Habakkuk questioned God.

We should let Habakkuk’s words loose our tongues to say whatever we

need to say to God so that, in speaking, we might listen for a word from God. “Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves” (Habakkuk 1:13)?

It is good that people of faith question God because our questions at least demonstrate our awareness of the condition of the world. If our tongues were silent would not our silence condemn our indifference?

“I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me” (Habakkuk 2:1). Listening is the price of faithful questioning. There is no sin in asking, as long as we listen once we do. Indeed, God answers Habakkuk with these words: “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4).

God’s words are an affirmation to Habakkuk and a word of hope to all generations of people of faith. We don’t live by what we see in the headlines. We live by what we know about the God of faithfulness no matter what the headlines scream. It is the faithfulness of God, witnessed to generations, that is the lifeblood of our faith.

This also is an affirmation of the purpose of private and corporate worship. Each time we gather for worship, whether in a private home or in the sanctuary, we rehearse the faithfulness of God. “I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy” (Habakkuk 3:2).

To stand in awe of God’s deeds means we rehearse the history of our faith. We look back at what God has done in the past so we can then turn our faces into the wind of the future with faith. We can pray aloud, celebrating and pleading, “Dear God, repeat them in our day!”

Habakkuk may have been complaining for legitimate reasons. He also was, in his complaining, betraying his stubborn faith as well. Habakkuk had not

given up on God. He had nowhere else to turn but to God, even with his questions about the justice of God in the light of unfettered evil.

It is so crucial we help our children, our friends and our co-workers to know questions are an essential part of faith, not a witness to its weakness. Why would God have insured we received these centuries-old words if God didn't want to encourage us to turn to God in times of questioning? Where else would God have us go with our questions? It is a wonderful thing to discover questioning is essential to faith, not in opposition to it. More people would believe in God if they knew they were free to question God.

We live, as every generation has, in a time of economic and political uncertainty. We are not the first, and we won't be the last. Job was the one to utter these phenomenal words in the face of unspeakable loss and grief: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15).

Habakkuk uttered the same spirit as well: "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, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Faith is found in the questions, not the answers. We don't need faith for what we already know. We need faith for what we don't know, not what we do know (Hebrews 11:1).

Habakkuk may have been a man from a century long ago. In his faith, he was man who faced what we face in this new century, in this new year, and he helped us know how to face it all with timeless faith.