

Hopeless Hope

On Sunday, we launched into the season of Advent with a reminder from Pastor Vivian about what it looks like to hope in God even in really difficult times.

1. Before we discuss the sermon, first a warm up question: How was your Thanksgiving holiday? What's the absolute best thing your ate?
2. At the outset of her sermon, Vivian said, "Advent confronts all of [the cynicism and negativity of life] and says God has not abandoned the world; hope is real and something is coming. Merry Christmas!! Take that hopelessness!" To illustrate this process at work, she walked us through the Old Testament story of the prophet Habakkuk. He lived at a time when the nation of Israel was being ripped apart by the powerful, cruel Babylonian Empire. The conditions faced by Habakkuk and his people almost caused him to abandon faith and hope. Turn to page 3 of this study guide to read what Habakkuk says.
 - a. When you read Habakkuk's words, what experience does it remind you of in life, i.e., a time when God seemed to stand by while something horrible was happening? Did that experience challenge your faith?
 - b. Vivian said, "I read about a picture of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney, the burned debris of what had been the family's sole possessions. In front of this destroyed home stood an old man dressed only in his underwear holding a small boy's hand who was clutching a patched pair of overalls. The child was crying. Beneath the picture were the words 'Hush child, God ain't dead!'" When you hear that, what thoughts, feelings, questions, or emotions does it evoke within you?
 - c. Some people go through very difficult times and that seems to shake their faith. Other people go through very difficult times and their faith seems to grow. What makes the difference?
3. Vivian challenged us to . . . HOPE IN GOD EVEN WHEN GOD IS NOT DOING ANYTHING. She told about a time in her life when she cried out to God, but God did not seem to be responding. In her misery, she randomly flipped through her Bible and landed on Psalm 13, "How long will you forget me, O God?" As she continued flipping, she next landed on Isaiah 49:15, "Can a woman forget a child at her breast? Yes, they may forget, but I will not forget you, says the Lord." For Vivian, the discovery of the Isaiah verse felt like a direct word from God that lifted her spirits and gave her hope in the midst of tough times. How about you? Does believing God's promise not to abandon you help you in time of despair? If so, how does it help? If not, why not?
4. Vivian told the story of a little boy badly burned who seemed to have given up hope he would live. When a tutor came to his room to help him keep up with his school

work – teaching him the difference between nouns and adverbs – the boy’s attitude changed completely because, as he later explained, “They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs if I was dying, would they?” Hope changed everything for that boy.

- a. Why? Why is hope so critical?
 - b. When has hope lifted you from despair?
5. Vivian pointed out that hoping while we wait doesn’t meant passive waiting. She pointed out that the word “waiting” not only means “to expect or look for,” but also implies action. Just like a waiter waits your table at restaurant, good “waiting” is active, not passive. Vivian suggested the following elements are essential to “good waiting”:
- Wait patiently. God’s answer sometimes takes a long time to develop.
 - Wait quietly, i.e., calmly – confident that God’s love will not abandon us.
 - Wait hopefully, believing God is somehow at work
- a. Which of these three elements is most challenging to you – and why?
 - b. On a practical level, what helps you to keep your faith strong while waiting for God?
6. Vivian also encouraged us to, OPEN IN GOD EVENWHEN THE ANSWER IS NOT WHAT YOU WANTED OR EXPECTED. For Habakkuk that was a tall order. He wanted God to deliver his people, instead God sent the Chaldeans from Babylon to take them captive for a long period of time. The bad news hit Habakkuk hard; he was no Pollyanna. He said, “When I heard it, my stomach did flips. I stammered and stuttered. My bones turned to water. I staggered and stumbled.” Yet, as Habakkuk processes all this bad news, he defiantly chose to believe somehow God was working even through the bad. Read what he says in Habakkuk 3:17-19 (printed on page 3).
- a. What is Habakkuk saying in these verses? How would you put it in your own words?
 - b. According to these verses, why is Habakkuk able to “turn cartwheels of joy” even as everything is coming apart around him? What’s the key phrase in this passage?
 - c. Suppose someone asked you, “Do you believe ‘God’s rule will prevail’ in your life and our world?” How would you answer and what reasons would you give for your answer?
 - d. In what situation in your life right now do you need to apply today’s lesson?

Scriptures printed on next page.

Message Bible rendition of . . .

Habakkuk 1:1-4

God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell “Help! Murder! Police!” before you come to the rescue?

Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place.

Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke.

The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the cherry trees don't blossom, and the strawberries don't ripen, though the apples are worm-eaten, and the wheat fields stunted, though the sheep pens are sheepless, and the cattle barns empty, I'm singing joyful praise to God.

I'm turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.

Counting on God's Rule to prevail, I take heart and gain strength. I run like a deer. I feel like I'm king of the mountain!