

The Season Of Hope

On Sunday, we began the Season of Advent with a lesson from the prophet Habakkuk.

1. Warm-up Question: On Sunday, Pastor Vivian described how some families build up to Christmas with an Advent Calendar. What was/is a favorite Christmas season tradition in your family?
2. Some Christians observe “the season of Advent,” others don’t. The basic idea of Advent is to set aside the weeks leading up to Christmas as a time of waiting, hope, and expectation. In effect, we’re reenacting the centuries during which faithful people patiently awaited the Messiah. Each week a different Advent candle is lit and certain anticipatory Scriptures are read. Observant families have an Advent Calendar at home, opening a tab for each day to reveal a surprise hidden behind it, as part of the countdown to Christmas. Does this appeal to you? Why or why not? What are some other creative ways we can mark Advent?
3. On Sunday we lit the first Advent candle, the candle of Hope. To mark the occasion, we read a Scripture about hope and despair from the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk is an obscure Hebrew prophet who lived when Israel was collapsing and Babylonians were in power; the Babylonians were a cruel and violent people who oppressed the Israelites by forcing them to pay tribute. When we first meet Habakkuk, we find him having a debate with God. Read Habakkuk 1:1-4.
 - a. Everywhere Habakkuk looked in his nation and the world around him, he saw terrible things happening. He felt despair. When you look at our nation and the world around us today, what word best describes how you feel? (Explain the word you choose.)
 - b. Vivian said, “What makes this book stand out is that Habakkuk was arguing with God.” Many of us have been taught that arguing with God is wrong. What were you taught? Do you ever allow yourself to argue with God? Why or why not?
 - c. Vivian said, “To complain to God is an act of faith.” What do you think she meant? Do you agree?
 - d. Vivian told about a time when she felt miserable and forgotten by God. When in your life have you felt that way?
4. God’s response to Habakkuk’s cry of distress is shocking. Instead of words of comfort, God says in effect, “Yes, I know all about the violence and iniquity, and you bet I’m going to do something about it, but hang on to your hat, because my plan is to use the Babylonians to discipline my people.” To which Habakkuk must have thought, “*The Babylonians?* The pagan, idol worshiping, power hungry Babylonians? Are you kidding me, God?” In Habakkuk 3:16, Habakkuk says “I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me.” The phrase “my body trembled” in Hebrew literally means “my

guts trembled.” Habakkuk is describing an anxiety attack. Have you ever had an anxiety attack? What prompted it? What did it feel like? Does it give you comfort that Habakkuk also experienced an anxiety attack?

5. In the last few verses of his book, Habakkuk describes the grave deprivations that will afflict his people after the Babylonians invade, but then reaches his own shocking conclusion. Read Habakkuk 3:17-19.

It is amazing that Habakkuk can rejoice even while his gut is trembling. He can trust in the integrity of God even when he doesn't understand the plan of God. He's quaking, yes, but he also has quietness and joy. How is that possible? Have you ever experienced something like that (tranquility amidst great adversity) or observed someone who did?

6. Vivian offered several suggestions for how we can cultivate a spirit so strong that we too can experience quietness and joy in the midst of crazy trouble. The key, she suggested, is consistent spiritual practices that feed and strengthen our souls. Specifically, she suggested:

- **Remind yourself of the great truths** of God and great things God has done in for you in the past. One way to do this is through a Gratitude Journal.
- Consistently come to church to **worship and sing praises** to God and each other.
- Consistently come to church to **listen to messages of encouragement** and perspective from God's Word.
- Be part of a **small group** or otherwise surround yourself with people who consistently remind you of God's presence and love.

Do you buy the notion that consistent spiritual practices are the key to tranquility even in times of great trouble? If so, is there a specific spiritual practice that you feel called to amp-up in your life?

7. Habakkuk's final words are, “Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and God will make my feet like hinds' feet, and will make me to walk upon mine high places.” Habakkuk 3:19. To illustrate Habakkuk's words, Vivian showed a photo of goats climbing Hoover Dam. Take a look at the photo on page 3. What does that word image say to you?
8. What was true for Habakkuk can be true for us today. Vivian summed it all up like this: Advent confronts our temptation to despair and says God has not abandoned the world, hope is real, and something is coming. Where in your life right now are you tempted to feel despair? What do you think God wants to say to you about that place of despair?

