**Habakkuk 3:17-19** November 25, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** The Eve of Thanksgiving

*Habakkuk 3:17 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,
18yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
 I will be joyful in God my Savior.
19The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
 he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
 he enables me to go on the heights.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Learning How to Count (Your Blessings)**

 I don’t know what you think about this Bible reading, but it really is an awful reading for a Thanksgiving sermon. Who picks these things?

 Why not that reading from Luke. There’s a good reading. Ten guys with an incurable flesh-eating disease, separated from loved ones for the rest of their short lives. And then comes Jesus and he heals them! Life restored! I can’t imagine the joy they felt, I really can’t. And there is that one guy who in his overwhelming joy did the right thing and returned to Jesus, giving thanks and praising God. That would be better material for a Thanksgiving sermon.

 Or how about that Psalm we read, Psalm 147? *“How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting…”* – just like it says on the front of the bulletin. *“He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.”* What beauty! It brightens the eyes to think about sun and clouds, rain and green grass; beautiful landscape photos worthy of a computer screen background. Don’t you think that would be better for Thanksgiving?

 But this Habakkuk guy, he’s got issues. At our house on most Thanksgivings we have a paper cutout turkey and each of us are given two or three paper feathers to write our blessings on and stick to the turkey. (That’s to my wife’s credit, not mine.) We try and guess who wrote each of their blessings. It’s a fun game.

 Habakkuk doesn’t want to play that game. ***“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…”*** Habakkuk’s one of those guys we get warned about: “Stay away from people who drag you down.”

 And he’s got that name—Habakkuk. Really? How do you spell that? One “b” and three “k”s? I don’t know anyone with three “k”s in their first name. And if you want to find this guy in the Bible he’s right there between two other winners: Nahum and Zephaniah. Really? Habakkuk?

 Yep. Habakkuk.

 Don’t be so hard on the guy. Let’s walk with Habakkuk around his farm. Leave your city slicker eyes in the car. Put on your farmer eyes. As a farmer, you live off the bounty of the land. It’s what fills your stomach and clothes your kids. It’s what gives you a sense of accomplishment when you fall into bed after a day of hard physical labor. Let Habakkuk walk you around the place. Down in the valley, take a look at the fig and olive orchards. Walk the hillsides and examine the carefully pruned rows of grape vines. Look at the pens and pastures around the homestead. Nothing. That’s what Habakkuk sees. Nothing. And there won’t be any government bailout of the agricultural sector, no international aid convoy bringing in relief supplies. In fact, if anything, the foreign powers are going to take advantage of Israel’s weakness in the year of their disaster and bring them even worse!

 I think this is a terrible Thanksgiving day reading. Don’t you?

 These verses of the Bible have been on my mind a lot in the last couple weeks. Like Habakkuk, I’m looking for blessings, for things to be thankful for, but I’m having trouble. To be honest, I am not looking at the ruin that Habakkuk was looking at. It’s not that bad. But just this morning I commented to my wife that today’s dreary skies on the eve of Thanksgiving are sort of… appropriate.

 Let’s leave Habakkuk for a while. He’ll be there when we get back. People like him don’t go anywhere. Let’s go to the two Thanksgivings that stand out in the history of America. You know them: Thanksgiving 1621 and Thanksgiving 1863. Thanksgiving 1621 is commonly thought of as the First Thanksgiving in America. Thanksgiving 1863 was the first official national-wide celebration of Thanksgiving.

 There is a surprise behind these two most famous American Thanksgivings. They surprise you until you stop and think about it.

 The Pilgrims’ Thanksgiving in 1621 happened after a decent harvest. It also happened after a pretty bad year. In just over twelve months between departing England and their first Thanksgiving, nearly 50% of those Pilgrims died. How many people are in your extended family? 15? 20? Imagine if 8 of them died in the next 12 months. How thankful would you be? Wouldn’t your neighbors and friends pity you? Wouldn’t they talk in hushed tones about what a tough go you’ve had of it? And then when they see you throw a feast of thanksgiving for the whole town, they’re going to put you on suicide watch. But that is what the Pilgrims did: gave thanks to God.

 That was 1621. In 1863, President Lincoln declared the first national celebration of Thanksgiving. In 1863 the United States was in the middle of the bloodiest war we have ever fought. Swathes of the country had been ransacked and destroyed. And while we can look back and see that the tide had turned, it was not yet a foregone conclusion. It would still be two years before a treaty. Yet 1863 was the year where the nation turned and thanked God for all they had. It’s been a national holiday ever since.

 It makes me think that in 1621 and 1863 these people were not giving thanks to God for the first time in their lives. Because unless you are used to giving thanks, you can’t in those circumstances. They were people used to giving thanks to God throughout their lives.

 And it makes me wonder about something. What if Habakkuk had walked around his farm and found figs and grapes, sheep and cattle. What would he have said? Would he still have said, “***The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights”***? Would he? Maybe. But if he had said it in a year of bounty and plenty, of laughing kids and full cupboards, I don’t think this Bible passage would have been on my mind over the last few weeks. No, it most certainly would not have been!

 The empty trees and pens and corncribs led Habakkuk to say something all the more amazing, ***“I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”*** He would rejoice. He wouldn’t just suck it up and take his medicine like a man, he would be joyful. In that year of his life, the earthly things weren’t getting in the way of Habakkuk’s view of God. He knew that there is more between God and him than food and money. He had learned, long before the Apostle Paul wrote it, he had *“learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, wheteher well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”* (Php. 4:12).

 He knew it is about his soul standing before God, about eternity, about his Savior. Yes, his Savior. Habakkuk couldn’t yet put the name Jesus to his Savior. But he knew that he needed God, and he needed God for more than he needed the next meal. He knew that he needed God for eternity. And because the Lord God had taken care of the most important thing in his life, forgiveness of sins and a right standing with God, he would—not just suck it up and make it through the year—but he would rejoice.

 Maybe this guy with the strange name, God’s prophet Habakkuk, maybe he does have something to say to us this Thanksgiving. Amen.