

New Year Day Service

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[0 : 00] Well, what kind of year will 2016 prove to be? From some angles, from some perspectives, it's not looking that great, thinking especially of the city where we live.

Many in the congregation, certainly a number in the congregation, are beginning the year out of work. Others are still clinging on to employment, but maybe looking with some trepidation to what 2016 might bring.

The oil price continues to tumble, I think from a high of \$115 back in the middle of 2014 to I think yesterday I had a quick look, I think it's at about \$36.

I don't know if that's changed from yesterday, but that's a big drop by any measure. And beyond the numbers that we might think, well, it's just numbers, we know that they have an impact in real circumstances and in people's lives.

And I'm sure in board meetings that will be taking place at the beginning of this year, further purges to the workforce will be on the agenda.

[1 : 18] I wonder if 2016 might see you losing your job. Maybe 2016 will be the year in which you slide into negative equity.

Or maybe you'll face other bad news in the course of the year. Maybe ill health will be your experience, or the experience of one or more of those whom you love.

Perhaps you'll experience bereavement and the loss and grief that that brings. Family troubles of one kind or another may be your experience.

In the midst of all that, I suppose, we've got the Euros to look forward to in the summer. That's right, the finals where every home nation bar Scotland will be competing.

So, all in all, it seems that things are looking a little bit gloomy. Maybe that's just me looking at things from just one perspective.

[2 : 18] But even as we do anticipate or consider the possibility of difficult times in the year ahead, is it not the case that, well, we're Christians, so we'll be okay.

We're Christians. We'll be shielded from all the bad stuff. Or will we? Christians lose their jobs. The homes of the God-fearing also get flooded. Believers get cancer, and we could go on. We know that that is so. We only need to look around and look back in our own experience and know that that is the case.

Now, in the passage that we read, Habakkuk, the prophet Habakkuk, is looking forward and anticipating what lies ahead for him and for God's people.

And what did he see as he looked into his immediate future? We want to think about that and think especially about his response or what he anticipates his response will be, what he declares his response will be in the face of trial and trouble of one kind or another.

[3 : 36] Very briefly, just to comment on the historical occasion of Habakkuk's prophecy. In the course of the prophecy, it's not a very long book, we're not given precise historical references that would allow us to, with precision, locate Habakkuk in terms of when he ministered.

But we are given some and sufficient to, in broad terms, work out when it was that Habakkuk was ministering and prophesying to God's people.

In chapter 1 of Habakkuk, in verse 6, there's a reference to the Babylonians and God raising up the Babylonians to execute judgment on Judah. And so that reference alone gives us a pretty good idea of when Habakkuk lived and served.

It would seem to have been before this happens, the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of Jerusalem. It's something that's being anticipated.

Indeed, in the verses that we're going to be thinking about, in chapter 3 and from verse 16 onwards, again, there's a reference to the nation invading us. And again, it's entirely reasonable to presume

that that also is a reference to Babylon, as Babylon had been referred to just a few moments before.

[5 : 02] So, about 600 B.C., more or less, is when Habakkuk lived and served. But what did he anticipate was on the agenda for Judah?

Well, from verse 16, we can identify what was lying ahead for them. We read there, I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound, decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled, yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

The nation invading us. What is on the agenda, what is anticipated, and in due course happened, is invasion and destruction.

In the verse that we've read, curiously, and we'll come back to this in a moment, Habakkuk is looking beyond that to judgment being meted out on the Babylonians for invading Judah.

But of course, prior to that, there is the invasion itself, and all that comes with it. The abject military defeat that Judah was to suffer, the destruction of Jerusalem in gruesome circumstances that we won't go into this morning.

[6 : 26] This is what is on the agenda. Destruction, invasion, indescribable suffering. But then he goes on to anticipate the possibility also of economic collapse, perhaps in some way connected to the military and political difficulties that the people were to endure.

In verses 17 and 18, perhaps the very familiar words of Habakkuk. There's a few memorable quotes from Habakkuk that we use in different contexts and sometimes don't know where they come from, but this certainly is a part of the prophecy that's, I think, very familiar because it's so memorable.

In verse 17, Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes in 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.

Now, Habakkuk isn't stating that all this will happen, but he's certainly anticipating it as a possibility, and he's saying that even if all of these things do happen, they may, they may not, but even if they do, this will be my response.

But for the moment, we want to just think about what is it that he's anticipating certainly as a possibility. And really what we've read is a description of complete economic collapse for the nation.

[7 : 53] Israel was, of course, Judah, an agrarian economy. Agriculture was to Judah what oil is to Aberdeen, but only more so.

We think of ourselves as a very oil-dependent economy, and yet, in contrast to Judah, we're very diverse. There are other economic activities, but for Judah, agriculture was far and away the dominant economic activity, and what's being described is a complete collapse in that agricultural economy.

That is what Habakkuk anticipates as something that may happen in the immediate future in the future of the nation. It's nothing less than an economic meltdown.

This isn't oil at \$36 a barrel. It's a complete shutdown of all production. It goes beyond one sector to depleted fishing stocks, if we're thinking of our own context, collapse of tourism, the disappearance of much of the public sector.

That would be a parallel to what Habakkuk is anticipating as a possibility for Judah. And, of course, invasion, destruction, economic collapse brings with it famine.

[9 : 17] It brings with it misery. It brings with it death and despair. This is what Habakkuk is anticipating in what lies ahead for Judah.

And even just noticing that, one thing that it does, before turning to how he responds, which is our principal concern, but one thing even describing what Habakkuk anticipates, one thing that that does is that it puts our own circumstances into a bit of perspective in the grand scheme of things. Even our worst-case scenarios for the city, for our own individual circumstances, though, of course, they're very varied.

But even our worst-case scenarios are, I don't think, in the same league as what Habakkuk was anticipating. So even at that level, it gives us a sense of perspective.

But then, of course, we're just thinking about ourselves, and it's not just about us. For many of our fellow men and many of our fellow believers, 2016 is looking very grim.

[10 : 27] We've been hearing a lot about El Nino and effects in climate across the globe as a result of El Nino. I believe the fact that I couldn't go to Sainsbury's on New Year's Eve is partly the fault of El Nino, so I'm told.

And, of course, that's a minor inconvenience. Instead of going to Sainsbury's, I go to Asda. Now, I know others have been much more affected beyond just minor inconvenience. But as we look ahead into the year, we're told that the effects of El Nino will be very dramatic across the globe.

And in Africa, in particular, it's anticipated over 30 million people will suffer the results of famine because of the droughts that accompany all the changes that I don't understand that the warm currents in the Pacific then produce.

In Ethiopia, we had a few folks from Bonacore just a year ago today were in Ethiopia and it's anticipated that Ethiopia will bear the brunt of that, maybe 10 million people in the course of the year, the victims of famine.

[11 : 39] That doesn't mean they're all going to die. I certainly hope it doesn't mean they're going to die, but they'll be dependent on food aid because of famine. But then if we think of our fellow believers across the globe, we know how this year that has ended has been one of indescribable suffering for Christians and other minority groups in the Middle East as vast swathes of territory have been cleansed by Islamic State or Daesh or whatever they're called these days.

Millennial Christian communities destroyed and emptied. What will the year that has begun hold for such? How are we as Christians to respond to tough times?

Well, Habakkuk can help us and I want to identify three strands to his response. I'm not going to spend much time on each of them, identify them, and hopefully it will serve to engrave on our minds these manners or these ways in which we can learn from Habakkuk as to how we should respond to difficult times.

And so when we face them, be they grave and intense or less so, depending on our own circumstances, we would be able to respond as we ought.

a response that is fitting for men and women of God in Habakkuk's day but also in our day. Take a mental note of these three strands of a response.

[13 : 21] A mental note, you might want to scribble it down and put the bit of paper on your fridge in the kitchen. Or maybe that's a bit old-fashioned. Maybe you need to put it as a screensaver on your computer or in your smartphone.

Well, whatever. But somewhere visible that you can see and be reminded of it in the course of the year. Three ways to respond to difficult times. Firstly, wait patiently on God.

Secondly, direct praise to God. And thirdly, receive power from God. I think we can find these three things in Habakkuk.

And let's think of them in turn. First of all, wait patiently on God. In verse 16, in the second half of the verse, Habakkuk declares, yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

He's waiting patiently on God acting. This day of calamity that he speaks of isn't actually the day of calamity that he would endure when Babylon invaded, but rather he's looking ahead to God acting in judgment upon Babylon.

[14 : 32] Babylon was an instrument of God in judging Judah, but in turn, Babylon herself would also be judged. And Habakkuk waits patiently on God to do as God will do.

He is waiting, resting, trusting in God. Let's just note one or two features of this waiting on God, this waiting patiently on God. The first thing to notice is that it's not stoic resignation.

As he anticipates his own suffering and the suffering of his people, and then looking further ahead to the consequences for Babylon. But as he awaits these events, horrendous though they would be, he's not doing so.

He's not waiting, as I say, in a spirit of stoic resignation. Verse 16, he describes his emotions. He's terrified. I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound, decay crept into my bones and my legs tremble, yet I will wait patiently.

These things are happening in parallel. He's waiting patiently on God, he's accompanied by this trembling. We're allowed to be afraid when we face trouble and grief and trial and loss and ill health and economic challenges or whatever they might be.

[16 : 03] We're allowed to be afraid. We're allowed to be concerned. We're allowed to tremble as Habakkuk trembled. But that trembling and that fear is to be accompanied by patiently waiting on God.

He waits patiently on God but not in, as I say, a spirit of stoic resignation. But this waiting patiently on God is also grounded in reality.

His patient waiting is in effect a resting or trusting in God. He's trusting in the wisdom and justice of God, a God who always does the right thing.

Now in the midst of the Babylonian invasion it would have been difficult even for the most pious to understand how this could be the right thing. And yet Habakkuk waits on God.

He is confident that God will do the right thing. Now ultimately as Habakkuk himself identifies here in that verse in verse 16 the right thing ultimately will be judgment on the invading a nation.

[17:15] but on what grounds does Habakkuk trust in God? He is trusting in God. He's waiting patiently on God but on what grounds? Does he have reason to so trust?

Well his trust is grounded in the reality of God's character and of God's track record. And of course his track record is in sympathy with, it's in accord with his character.

At the beginning of the chapter what do we read in verse 2? Lord I have heard of your fame. I stand in awe of your deeds O Lord. Renew them in our day in our time make them known in wrath remember mercy.

He knows God to be a merciful God to be a just God and his deeds reflect that. He can look back in history and discover that to be so.

And so as he looks back and sees that that is what God has done and that is how God has acted so he can look ahead in that same confidence. God will be true to his character. His deeds will reflect his justice and his mercy.

[18:23] God will do the right thing. He's waiting patiently on God grounded in reality but also I think we can say that it's a learned and a lifelong resting in God.

Habakkuk has learned to trust. He's learned to live by faith. Maybe one of the most quoted verses even in the New Testament from Habakkuk is the statement that he makes in chapter 2 and in verse 4 where he speaks of the righteous living by faith.

And of course the righteous living by faith isn't something that just happens. It's something that is learned. Habakkuk has learned to live by faith. We don't know the life span of Habakkuk when he was born and when he died and so we can only say this tentatively but it would seem unlikely that Habakkuk would have lived to see the day when his waiting patiently for God's judgment on Babylon came to fruition.

We know when that happened. In 539 B.C. when the Medes and the Persians won victory against the Babylonians. Habakkuk in all probability would not have lived to see that day but he knew it would come because he waited patiently on the God who does the right thing who always does the right thing.

So our first response to trouble to trial to difficulty to wait patiently on God to trust and to rest in his justice and in his wisdom.

[19:59] But then secondly we are to direct our praise to God. Following verse 17 where Habakkuk anticipates the possibilities of this desperate situation of economic collapse when all the crops fail and all the cattle die what does he then say?

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will be joyful in God my Savior. Nothing will stop the praise. There's a stubborn resolve Habakkuk that is very impressive it's very inspiring.

Whatever happens I will rejoice in God. Whatever happens I will praise. My lips will not be still.

Habakkuk can conceive of no circumstance that would steal him of his joy or God of his praise.

It's always right to praise God. And Habakkuk as he anticipates difficult days days in terms of difficulty way beyond what we are likely to experience.

We don't know what the year holds but we can reasonably anticipate that to be the case. Yet he cannot anticipate any circumstance where he would cease to praise God.

[21:16] His attitude his faith his stubborn resolve if you wish reminds me a little of three men who would be the victims of the impending Babylonian invasion. I'm thinking of the three friends of Daniel.

Remember when they were being required to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's image probably just a few decades after Habakkuk writes. How did they respond to this demand that was being placed upon them?

We read in the third chapter of Daniel Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king O Nebuchadnezzar we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter that we are thrown

into the blazing furnace the god we serve is able to save us from it and he will rescue us from your hand O king but even if he does not we want you to know O king that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

You see they say even in the most desperate scenario of not being spared even then we will not bow down we will remain loyal to our God we will continue to praise him direct your praise to God notice in the case of Habakkuk the character of this praise and indeed the source of his praise his praise is joyful I will be joyful in God my savior I will rejoice in the Lord it's not simply a grim determination to praise come what may to grit his teeth and carry on praising no his praise is joyful it is the joy of one who is waiting patiently on a faithful God his praise is grounded in God God is at the same time both the source and the object of his praise he rejoices in the Lord he rejoices in Yahweh in his covenant keeping and promise keeping God he rejoices in his savior there are many uncertainties in Habakkuk's future but there is one certainty

God will ever be his savior that will not change nothing can change that no circumstance will change that reality when we think of our own circumstances or your own circumstance perhaps in six months time you won't have a salary but you will have a savior and what would you choose a salary or a savior well I think it's a no brainer and in the case of Habakkuk he looks ahead and he says so many things could happen but one thing I know is that I will have my savior and I will praise my savior well may this be your experience throughout the course of 2016 rejoice in the Lord always I will say it again rejoice be joyful in God your savior be joyful in Jesus let me just pause for a moment and ask you a question is God your savior the joy that Habakkuk speaks of and testifies to is the joy of the believer it is the joy of the man who can sing the Lord is my shepherd it is the joy of the woman who can say of Jesus he loved me and gave himself for me it is the joy of the one who has been enabled to by faith embrace and appropriate the son of

[24 : 45] God as savior is that true of you but then finally the third strand of Habakkuk's response he waits patiently on God he directs his praise to God but then thirdly and finally he receives power from God Habakkuk does not contemplate the imminent hard times as times of simply holding on to faith until the storm passes Habakkuk is not advocating that as believers we simply batten down the hatches until calm is restored even that expression that I've just used to batten down the hatches is interesting in terms of its origins it's a naval expression that pictures the scene that where in the face of a storm the captain orders that all the hatches all the doors to the outside to the sea be sealed to keep the ship sealed from the storm from the waters that could come in and lead to the ship being sunk and sometimes that's maybe what we're tempted to do in hard times to batten down the hatches and say well we'll wait until the storm passes but that doesn't seem to be what

Habakkuk is contemplating it's not what he advises us to do rather in the midst of the storm we are to receive power from God for service for mission Habakkuk in verse 19 describes the sovereign Lord as his strength the sovereign Lord is my strength he makes my feet like the feet of a deer he enables me to go on the heights God is more than just the provider of strength or power he is our strength what can we say of the strength or the power that he supplies well the picture painted is of the deer and of the mobility of the deer and the places that the deer can go what is the picture that Habakkuk uses what does it say to us what does it paint for us well it's certainly a picture of vitality you can imagine you can visualize the skipping joy of the deer as it prances through the fields it's a picture of vitality yes even in difficult times in painful times

Habakkuk contemplates receiving power from God to grant to him and to God's people vitality it's a picture of stamina of the deer being enabled to reach to the very heights of the mountains he enables me to go to the very heights maybe also without stretching the picture too much we can see it as a picture of vision from the heights we can see our momentary troubles to use the language that Paul uses as he writes to the believers in Corinth from the heights we can see those momentary troubles however intense they may be for what they are and be captivated by God's big picture you see there's Habakkuk Babylon is about to invade the economy is about to collapse it's a desperate picture and yet he is able to declare that in those circumstances the Lord will make my feet like the feet of a deer he will enable me to go on the heights in the hard times we're not just to survive yes we will survive we will be upheld but we're to thrive as we receive the strength and the power that God grants well may that be your experience in 2016 may that be our experience as a congregation may that be the experience of God's people in Aberdeen in Scotland and indeed the world over so remember in the face of trouble trial and distress wait patiently on God direct your praise to God and receive power from God let's pray heavenly father we do thank you that you are

indeed a God who we can trust in we thank you for your character as it is revealed to us in the scriptures that you are a promise keeping God you're a faithful God you're a God who never lets your people go and so it is right and reasonable for us to wait on you to wait patiently that you're the God who will do all things right and do all things well we thank you that you call us and you help us to in every circumstance direct our praise to you and we ask that you would indeed help us in this regard that whatever the year holds our lives and our days would be characterized by would be marked by joyful praise directed to you you are the source of our joy you are the source of our praise but you are also and must ever be the object of our praise and we ask also that we would with Habakkuk know what it is to be strengthened by you to receive strength and power from God that with Habakkuk we would be able to declare the Lord is my strength that we would know what it is to be able to walk and run like the deer and to be able to climb to the highest heights that from there we might see your big picture and our part in it and all of these things we pray in Jesus name Amen