

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Unbottled

(Jesus...and your emotional life)

Embracing Passion

(The prophecy of Habakkuk)

Study #7

Introduction: An “unbottled” test case...

Jeff and I have titled the messages we’ve brought over the last few weeks “Unbottled”. And we all know that unbottling something under pressure can get messy. Go ahead and shake a Coke bottle. Quick, release the cap - you’ve got a mess on your hands.

But, when pressure is released under control, the result can be very good, and not messy. That’s exactly what happens in an internal combustion engine. Pressure is released, in a controlled, directed, way, which generates power.

In the same way, bottled up emotions are dangerous. They can blow, creating a mess. But, under the control of the Spirit, producing the Spirit’s fruit of *self-control*, “unbottled” emotions can generate power, honor God, and bless those around us.

Review the messages in this series...

In previous messages in this series, we have explored the path leading from anxiety to peace, the beauty of love, the importance of lament, the danger and the potential of anger, and the path to joy.

And next Sunday, we’ll welcome our friends, Danny and Dinah Wade, who will speak about emotional health from both their own experience and as counselors in private practice for over twenty years.

This morning, we are going to hear the story of a man who honestly expressed a variety of emotions to God. He unbottled them. And, by doing so, he points the way for us to unbottle our own emotions - especially before God - and for redemptive purposes.

Historical background to Habakkuk...

Today, we open to the short, Old Testament book of Habakkuk.¹

Here’s a bit of background if you’re not familiar with this oddly named prophet. Habakkuk lived and wrote around 600 BC,² which was long after the glory years of Kings David and Solomon.

In fact, by Habakkuk’s time, the nation of Israel had divided north and south. The northern kingdom (Israel) had fallen to the Assyrians one hundred and twenty years previous, and Judah, the southern kingdom, was in a sad spiritual state.

Judah’s king was Jehoiakim.³ And, whereas Josiah, Jehoiakim’s father, led the Jews into holiness, Jehoiakim blazed a wicked trail. Spiritual rebellion prevailed when Habakkuk sat down to write.

This book differs from most of the other prophetic books of the Bible. They usually address God’s people, beginning with **“Thus saith the Lord.”**

Not Habakkuk. He gives his message as a back-and-forth dialogue between himself and God. And it gets intense, it gets passionate, both from God’s side and from Habakkuk’s.

And, despite the intensity, Habakkuk never backs down. He’s got questions. He never stops his pursuit of the answers he seeks to the questions he has. And in this, he lives up to his name.⁴

¹ We don’t know much about Habakkuk, the man. Some believe that he was a Levitical priest, but we’re not even sure about that.

² He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah.

³ His name had been Eliakim, but Pharaoh Neco of Egypt changed it.

⁴ One of the reasons I love Habakkuk’s book is because he addresses the theme of *theodicy*. Theodicy refers to God’s justice. It is to consider whether God knows what in the world He is doing in the world. I think that the important questions in

In Hebrew, “habakkuk” comes from the word that means “embrace.” In this short book, the prophet embraces God with extreme passion.

He begins with a question most of us have asked at one time or another. The question? *“God, why are You so passive! Why won’t you do something about the mess the world is in?”*

At the beginning, we find an angry Habakkuk, expressing a cry that is timeless and as timely as this morning’s news feeds.

Angry - Wondering at God’s Seeming Inactivity (1:1-11)

Habakkuk: “God, Do Something!” (1:1-4)

The prophet’s impatience disappointment with God (v. 2)

[1] The pronouncement which Habakkuk the prophet saw:

**[2] How long, LORD, have I called for help,
And You do not hear?**

I cry out to You, “Violence!”

Yet You do not save.

Have you ever cried out for God to do something and been frustrated that He didn’t do it, that He seems passive, that God’s not doing anything? If so, you’re a part of a big club.

The way Habakkuk asks his question makes me think that he has been begging God to do something for years.

He sees violence and all the ugliness that goes with violence. And the violence that bothers him is not foreign violence, not “out there” violence. It’s right there in the streets of Jerusalem.

As he prays, there is a great boldness about him. He speaks his mind to God. God doesn’t seem to hear his calm comments, so he shouts, he cries out, **“Violence!”**

life boil down to theodicy. Why would a loving God allow THIS to happen? Why would an all-powerful God let THIS slip through? Why didn’t/won’t God DO something? Habakkuk’s prophecy meets the question of theodicy head on.

Habakkuk wants God to do something about the violence in Israel, and I suspect that he was hoping for revival, for repentance on the part of the nation, for a return to the Lord. Nothing happens. It’s as if God is asleep at the wheel.

In Jerusalem, the capitol city of the people of God, you can’t walk down the street without feeling threatened. Jerusalem - the city where God chose for His Name and His Glory to dwell - is the home of crime and bloodshed and injustice and immorality.

Shopkeepers board up their shops at night. Women don’t feel safe going out at night. Homeowners aren’t secure. Kids become victims.

Habakkuk felt this evil deeply. It was torment for him to witness the mayhem occurring all around him. He’s angry that God hasn’t done something about it - and he lets the Lord know about it.

The prophet’s suffering because of God’s inaction (vv. 3-4)

[3] Why do You make me see disaster,

And make me look at destitution?

Yes, devastation and violence are before me;

Strife exists and contention arises.

[4] Therefore the Law is ignored,

And justice is never upheld.

For the wicked surround the righteous;

Therefore justice comes out confused.

People are spiritually cold. The wicked hold sway over the righteous. And Habakkuk doesn’t understand how God can look on this situation and not do something about it, rectify it. Doesn’t God care?

We applaud Habakkuk’s words, and not because they are noble. We applaud them because they are honest. He is pouring his heart out to God.

Here is an emotional expression of anger at what’s going on all around him. It’s intense, made more intense by his understanding that God sees what he sees, knows all about it - and does nothing.

Habakkuk expected more from God. He longed for God's intervention - and he said it out loud.

He is shooting straight with God, and that is a good thing. It's a good thing when you tell God what is on your heart. It's OK to express that you want Him to do something, even that you feel like He should be doing more than He is doing, given the righteous, holy God He is.

As Habakkuk pours out his heart to God, he hears a throat-clearing, "**Ahem**" in the background. It is God, preparing to respond to Habakkuk's anger.

God assures His prophet that He is, indeed, going to do something about the Jews' sin.

God: "Oh, I am Doing Something..." (1:5-11)

***[5] "Look among the nations! Watch!
Be horrified! Be frightened speechless!
For I am accomplishing a work in your days -
You would not believe it even if you were told!"***

In complaining to God about Israel's sin, Habakkuk had envisioned a revival solution, a holiness movement accompanied by repentance and renewed commitment to God and His Word.

Well, God had something else entirely in mind. He will certainly put a stop to Israel's idolatry and injustice. But not by way of revival. It will be by way of judgment.

God's plan is to punish His people by sending the army of the Chaldeans (i.e. - Babylon) to defeat them militarily.

In the remainder of the first chapter, God describes the ways of the Chaldeans. Their horses are as swift as leopards. They are as fierce as wolves and as ravenous for conquest as eagles. They are bent on violence, destruction, and conquest.

He gives an image of Babylon's might as of a tornado, tearing across the desert, unstoppable, devouring everything in its path,

eventually destroying Israel and taking the Jews into captivity - because that was what Babylon did.

Of course, Habakkuk already knew all about the Chaldeans. He knew of their idolatry, immorality, injustice, arrogance, and violence.

But at least now he has his answer. He thought God wasn't doing anything. But God has pulled the curtain back and revealed that He was, in fact, doing something. Something big...and troubling.

This revelation of God's plan would have been a shocker to Habakkuk. He never saw this coming. And he is now not angry. He is confused.

He was angry with God for not doing anything. He is now just as confused as he had been angry about what God is going to do.

Confused - Confounded by God's Seeming Iniquity (1:12--2:3)

Habakkuk's Question (1:12-13)

***[12] Are You not from time everlasting,
LORD, my God, my Holy One?
We will not die.
You, LORD, have appointed them to deliver judgment;
And You, O Rock, have destined them to punish.
[13] Your eyes are too pure to look at evil,
And You cannot look at harm favorably.
Why do You look favorably
At those who deal treacherously?
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up
Those more righteous than they?***

It is not that Habakkuk doesn't understand God's plan. He understands it. He just doesn't "get it."

How could God use a nation like the Chaldeans - ten times as wicked as Judah ever thought of being - to discipline His people? Where is the justice in that? It looks positively unjust.

At first, when He looked at God, He saw God's *inactivity*, His lack of care. Now, he looks and sees God's apparent *iniquity*.

I don't know about you, but given a choice, I'll take a passive God over a malevolent God any day.

In what follows, Habakkuk envisions his people being taken away to captivity like fish. They are dragged away in nets. They are captured with hooks (something that the Assyrians did; maybe the Babylonians, too?).

He began his book angry that God was an absent king. He wasn't intervening enough.

Then, Habakkuk discovers that God is just about to intervene - and he likes the intervention God has planned even less than the passivity he thought he saw.

It goes without saying that confusion about God's ways is not restricted to prophets who lived in 600 BC. Most of us, at some time or another, feel confused by God, at some level. We wonder...

Why did God allow THAT?

Why did God not intervene and stop THAT?

How does what God did or allowed reflect His righteousness?

If you have had those thoughts and feelings, you're not alone. You're in good company and you're not wrong to wonder. Many things about the way God's world works - or doesn't work - are confounding to us.

On a personal level, I have long wondered about what God allows to come into the lives of His people, the calamities He doesn't stop, the healings He doesn't perform.

God's ways have always been a cause of some confusion. That is always true, because it is always true that the world is broken, that there are always messes, and that we're not in the Garden anymore.

God doesn't (usually) cause bullets to swerve at the last minute, and He doesn't auto-correct steering errors on 1604. He doesn't keep

tornadoes and hurricanes at bay. Calamities that He could have averted still come.

So, we wonder. We're confused. And here is where Habakkuk offers help. He lives up to his name: "The Embracer." He is going to cling to God.

"I'm going to hold on to God for all I'm worth. I'm going to listen and learn what God wants me to learn."

Habakkuk's Submissive Attentiveness (2:1)

***[2:1] I will stand at my guard post
And station myself on the watchtower;
And I will keep watch to see what He will say to me,
And how I may reply when I am reprimanded.***

Today, if you are confused by the ways of God, listen to Habakkuk. This is the reverent faith of the confused.

Life was confusing for Habakkuk. His beloved nation was going to be destroyed and his people taken away into captivity.

Life can be confusing for us, too. So, notice that there is intensity here, but no demandingness. There is passion, but no railing or fist-shaking.

Instead, as he waits, he remembers what he has been taught and what he has seen about God's goodness. He doesn't make sweeping accusations against God. You won't either.

After all, you've seen God's goodness, not only in the Bible's stories, but also in the details of your life. And you've seen more of God's goodness than Habakkuk ever saw.

You have seen a Savior nailed to a cross for you and risen from the dead for you. The Spirit of God is alive and well within you. God has provided for your needs, encouraged you, answered prayer.

You will join Habakkuk in a posture of submissive attentiveness. It's OK to scratch your head and wonder about what God does and doesn't do, what He does and doesn't allow.

But after expressing confusion, we aim to be learners, sitting at God's feet.

It is only right to give God the benefit of the doubt. Wait. Listen. Learn. EMBRACE God. Don't push Him away.

Habakkuk's question was a simple one: *"God, what are You doing?!"*

God's answer is straightforward: *"Trust Me. I know what I'm doing. Your instincts are correct. I am good - but I'm not following your script."*

God's Righteous Ways (2:2-3; 18-20)

In the bulk of the second chapter, God pulls back the curtain and reveals His "script" to Habakkuk. He assures Habakkuk that even though Babylon will be God's tool to judge Israel, Babylon will also fall.

And fall she did in October of 539 BC, when she was overrun by the Medes and the Persians under Cyrus the Great.

The Lord also makes clear why she will fall. It is her sin that will bring about her judgment. Read through the second chapter of Habakkuk and you will find a whole catalogue of Babylon's sins.

- She charged exorbitant interest rates on loans (vv. 6-8).
- She trusted in the walls that surround the city rather than in the one true God (vv. 9-11).⁵
- She committed violence against the innocent (vv. 12-14).
- She allowed injustice to flourish unchecked (vv. 15-17).⁶
- She committed idolatry (vv. 18-20).⁷

⁵ Babylon's wall was 85 feet thick and eleven miles long.

⁶ Alexander the Great noted in his journal that he was shocked at the morals of Babylon (cf. Rev. 17)

⁷ Check this out. God gets sarcastic!

All of this contributed to the downfall of Babylon.

To Habakkuk's question, *"Lord, how long will You allow the Chaldeans to trample nations?"* God gives an answer, *"Not that much longer. Her days are numbered."*

The Lord has now partially responded to Habakkuk's anger and confusion. He completes that response to all of us who are ever angry or confused by His ways in what follows.

God draws a thick, dark line that divides humanity in two. There are, first of all, proud, impudent, self-reliant people.

The Righteous Ones Trust in God (2:4-5)

The proud (vv. 4a, 5)

***[4a] "Behold, as for the impudent one,
His soul is not right within him...;
[5] Furthermore, wine betrays an arrogant man,⁸
So that he does not achieve his objective.
He enlarges his appetite like Sheol,
And he is like death, never satisfied.
He also gathers to himself all the nations
And collects to himself all the peoples.***

This is the person who tries to find life independent of God. He is the captain of his own ship. Nobody - not even God; especially not God! - tells him or her what to do.

The impudent proud person looks at the way life is working out and gives a verdict: "GOOD" or "BAD."

The proud person thinks he can evaluate the course of the world. He can judge God's actions and inactions as right or not.

God renders His own verdict on this man. His soul is ***"not right within him."***

⁸ The Chaldeans were known to be heavy drinkers, but the wine referred to here is the intoxicating effect of power, conquest, and wealth.

On the other hand, there is the man, the woman, who lives by another rule.

The faithful (v. 4b)

[4b] But the righteous one will live by his faith.⁹

These are the two possible approaches to life - prideful independence or trusting reliance on God - and they are diametrically opposed.

We may flit from one to the other throughout the day, but at any given moment, we are either living a life of independence or dependance, pride or submission, faith in self or faith in God.

And here, God puts a choice before Habakkuk and all of us who come after him.

“Will you trust Me? Will you remember My mercies and My promises - and trust Me even when you don’t understand My ways?”

In what we have seen, Habakkuk hasn’t done wrong. Anger isn’t sinful. It isn’t wrong to express that anger to God. And confusion is understandable. Questioning can be helpful.

But when it is all said and done, God invites us to trust that He knows exactly what He is doing. He asks that we withhold judging Him (it feels odd to even say that out loud). He calls us to live by faith.

Now, did Habakkuk ENJOY the explanation he was given about what God was going to do? Was he jubilant about the news of Babylon’s soon invasion of his beloved homeland? No - not at all.

But it is what it is. What God has said will come, will come. Is he going to raise his fist against God, or will he bow in humble faith?

⁹ Note the importance of these verses for New Testament theology; Gal. 3:11; Romans 1:17; Heb. 10:38; Heb 11:2; 2 Cor. 5:7; Romans 14:23. You might want to take a look at these passages and see how the New Testament authors develop the thought in their various writings.

Listen as Habakkuk closes his book in prayer. It is a prayer prayed in a certain style.

III. Worshipful - Intense, Agonized, Submissive (3:1-19)

[3:1] A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

The Hebrew word means “to stagger” or “to reel to and fro.” The emotions are stirred in this kind of a prayer. It is prayed with great variety of vocal pitch.

There is shouting in this prayer and whispering. Tears accompany this prayer. Hands are raised high. Knees are bent. Faces touch the ground.¹⁰

God’s Faithful, Righteous Work (vv. 1-15)

[2] LORD, I have heard the report about You, and I was afraid. LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years, In the midst of the years make it known. In anger remember mercy.

In this prayer, Habakkuk describes what he understands is going to happen to his beloved homeland. It is a bitter pill to swallow.

Destruction is coming. Judgment is racing across the Fertile Crescent and will ruin Jerusalem and all of Judah.

He envisions God as a warrior. He remembers how God fought for Israel in times past: at the Exodus (v. 5), in the wilderness (v. 6), during the days of Joshua (v. 11), and at the time of the Judges.

Now, God will be a warrior *against* His people. The Chaldeans are God’s chosen instruments to bring discipline on Habakkuk’s people, on God’s own people.

¹⁰ At three key points during this prayer, our Bibles insert the word “Selah.” “Selah” calls for a pause. It invites us to stop and let the words sink in. (vv. 3, 9, 13)

Habakkuk sees disaster, his fellow Jews will be scattered. He hears the victory shout of his enemies. He envisions wreckage.

But this scene of Habakkuk, mentally hovering over the coming wreckage, is not the last scene of the book. In the last scene, he lands.

Giving God Our No-Matter-What Devotion (vv. 16-19)

Anguish of body and soul (v. 16)

***[16] I heard, and my inner parts trembled;
At the sound, my lips quivered.
Decay enters my bones,
And in my place I tremble;
Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress,
For the people to arise who will attack us.***

Maybe you have had a day like this - or days, or longer! - when every part of your body shakes, your bones ache, you're nauseous because you dread what's ahead.

I hope not. But if you have, you know how Habakkuk is feeling. His emotions have overtaken body and soul.

Destruction is coming and there isn't a thing he can do about it.

He is like a car salesman watching an approaching hailstorm, or a soldier bracing for an enemy's attack. It's going to happen. And in the face of THAT, THIS is what he says to God.

Steadfast, faithful, worshipful (vv. 17-19)

***[17] Even if¹¹ the fig tree does not blossom,
And there is no fruit on the vines,
If the yield of the olive fails,
And the fields produce no food,***

¹¹ My version reads "If...", not because the destruction might not happen, but because it hasn't happened yet. Hebrew scholars I trust (Keil and Delitzsch) translate with no "if" in the passage.

***Even if the flock disappears from the fold,
And there are no cattle in the stalls,***

The Israel of Habakkuk's day was an agrarian culture. Everything centered around the land: crops and orchards, herds and flocks.

What's left if these are all destroyed? Nothing. No hope. No future.

Despite what he sees coming, though, Habakkuk worships. He expresses joy. He affirms his trust in God. He declares his no-matter-what devotion to God.

***[18] Yet I will triumph in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
[19] The Lord GOD is my strength,
And He has made my feet like deer's feet,
And has me walk on my high places.***

Remember. This prayer is according to *shigionoth*. It is wildly emotional. So, Habakkuk may well be weeping and shouting and whispering and dancing and lying prostrate while speaking.

But while shaking, he won't be shaken. He's going to walk into whatever the future holds, holding on to God

What about you?

Conclusion:

We've watched Habakkuk take a journey that ended beautifully. It was a painful journey. He passed through anger and confusion and ended up with a vibrant faith.

This week, I've wondered if maybe we don't get to vibrant faith without that journey. Expressing our emotions to God - reverently - can be painful.

Telling Him about your anger and disappointment and frustration and shattered dreams and fears and confusion is hard.

But owning our emotions and reverently expressing them to God clears the way for us to be able to hear, ***“The righteous one will live by faith.”***

Answering that call to entrust yourself to God equips you to cling to Him when the fig tree doesn't blossom and there are no cattle in the stalls, and when...

...the diagnosis is scary for you or for someone one you love.

...the physical pain is chronic and debilitating.

...you lose a job or your career is on the skids.

...the marriage has turned sour.

...your kids are going off the rails.

...a key friendship fractures.

Life is emotional. God meant for it to be that way. Habakkuk shows us that honestly expressing our emotions can be the pathway to a deep and genuine relationship with God.

He models what it looks like to walk that path, and then invites us to join him.