

Barre Congregational Church

October 2, 2022: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost** ~

“In Darkness we have hope and faith”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Psalm 137 and Habakkuk 1 v 1-4 and 2 v 1-4

I. Introduction:

In speaking to different people about the turbulent situation in the world; the pandemic, the fires, floods, and now hurricanes, the economy, political situation, and other social problems in our communities, some would say this is not new, we have had similar problems in the past. They continue to say, there was the flue pandemic in 1918, we have had crises situations again and again in this world...it is the eb and flow of human existence. Then others would show their concern by wondering how this all will end. It feels very scary and dark and uncertain to them. Some have no words, except for acknowledging that things feel quite different these days. Someone used the word grieving, that there is enormous grieving because of what we are going through, grieving for what was. Life was a bit easier not too long ago. While crime had been with us, at least moving about felt much safer than these days. I am sure you share some of these thoughts, right?

II. A life in exile for Judah

Life in Judah before the Babylonian exile, and before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in Jerusalem must have felt much safer and “more normal” than during the exile. While there was enormous division between the Northern and Southern Kingdom, that was the life they knew. Things were familiar to them. They had their religion and their community life. Or so it seems. Jeremiah rose as a prophet, called by God to address the iniquities of the people in the Southern Kingdom. For forty years while he was prophet, his message was a warning to the people of Judah to return to their life under Yahweh. Follow the commandments and live a life of purity and worship! This was a message to the people and to the priests at the time, who were lax and corrupt themselves, and so his message became a message of doom and destruction. Jeremiah addressed their weak faith and spoke about this foreign invasion of the Babylonians

who will become an instrument of Yahweh's wrath, says Porter in his book, *The Illustrated Guide to the Bible*. It is fair to say that Jeremiah's message also includes a message of hope, where Israel and Judah will be restored, and there will be a new covenant for a renewed Jerusalem. But first, we see the brutal fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, and the invasion of Judah, and the removal of the leaders of Judah into exile, leaving the poor and suffering to remain, trying to survive.

Life in exile was not too restrictive for the Jews according to Old Testament theologian, Bernard Anderson. They had some social freedoms and economic activity, but their religious life changed. They were now controlled by the Babylonians whose religion and culture were seen as superior to that of the Jews. They did not have their temple and they missed home.

That's where we find them in Psalm 137 at the rivers of Babylon. Here they lament their situation and are thrown into a deep and intense grieving over their loss. Imagine their traumatic situation of being forcefully removed from their country, their community, and their religious life where they could freely worship in the temple. They remember their songs of joy with musical instruments but cannot do that here. They are being mocked and tormented by their oppressors to sing to Zion the way they did back home, but they cannot do so in a foreign and idolatrous land, says Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger in their *Book on Psalms*. They are struggling with this reality, but pledge to remember Zion. If they forget, they might as well lose their right hand and have their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth, unable speak and sing. In their sorrow, they want to remember, and now pleading to Yahweh not to forget them either.

III. Habakkuk's plea to God

While Jeremiah warned the people of Judah to return to God, and warned them about this foreign invader, the prophet Habakkuk who lived during the time of the Babylonian exile, but also saw the injustices and iniquities perpetrated by the people of Israel prior to their exile, is now pleading to God who is a God of justice, to see these injustices taking place among the Jews. "How long must I call for help, and You do not listen? Violence, but You do not save? How long will Your people drift away from you? They refuse to obey Your law, and justice is perverted?" God answered him in these words, "I am going to do something in your days...I

will raise up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people” God’s warning is about these vicious and violent people who will come and take and destroy the people of Judah. But then later God’s message is also a message to the righteous, who, while they will live through this destruction, will live by their faith in God. The believers are encouraged to keep the faith by trusting the message from the prophet, and to be faithful to the Lord by living according to the covenant stipulations, Says S.D. Snyman in his book on Habakkuk.

IV. Conclusion

It is true to say, that we have seen war and violence and corruption and destruction of all forms in the past. Yes, we have seen wars for a long time, and we have seen social problems of all kinds for a long time, but we are also seeing them now. It is also true to say that God who is our God of history, a God of justice, sees the situations of war and violence, of corruption, of destruction, and God also sees the despair and the hopelessness, poverty and homelessness, of the drifting away by many from a Living God who wants to be our God, a God of mercy who cares and who wants to be engaged with us on a daily basis. God sees it all, and takes it all in.

We do not know how God will act now, having seen what we are seeing, because God is mysterious. However, as people of God in Christ, we are encouraged to keep the faith while we see much darkness around us. We are encouraged not to look at the signs of these times and shrug them off, but we must bow our heads and kneel before God, for God’s mercy upon us. So that while the floods and the fires and war and violence and corruption, and every social problem among us, are rife, we are called to keep the faith and to be faithful to God, seeking God’s mercy now, tomorrow and the days to come. May God help us to do just that.

In darkness we have hope and faith. Amen