

The Road-Trip Lament

Habakkuk 1:1-7; 2:1-4; 3:17-19

“Are we there yet?”

Remember that question? You know it well, I’m sure. It’s really a rhetorical question, because even the bored five-year old asking it already knows the answer!

“Are we there yet?” Not a question . . . more of a complaint . . . a lament: “I’m bored . . . how long is this going to take? . . . surely there’s more to life than this!”

Of course, as adults we grow out of such childish complaints, don’t we? Or, is it that we just don’t verbalise them as much? Like, when you look at your watch around the 15 minute mark and wonder, ‘Is this sermon ever going to end?’ No, I think we still know that lament well enough . . . it’s still our own lament in many situations in life . . . How long? When will this be over? Why me?

We know it, but still, no one quite articulates it as well as a bored five year old! In fact, that road-trip lament of a five year old is really a profound theological conversation. Remember, when you’re a kid time is immaterial . . . one minute could just as easily be a thousand years . . . and a thousand years goes by in a flash . . . you look up from your Playdoh one day and discover you’re 30!

But, in the back seat of a car in the middle of the Hay plain, each minute is definitely a thousand years! . . . so when that little voice rises in lament: “Are we there yet?” it’s more than a question . . . more than a complaint, even . . . it’s an accusation . . . an accusation against the one . . . the only one . . . who has the power to do anything about the situation . . . an accusation against the parent behind the wheel! That’s where the problem lies! They’re obviously not doing their job properly! “C’mon . . . I’m just the kid in the backseat . . . you’re the one in control . . . you’re the one behind the wheel . . . drive faster . . . take a short cut . . . do something!”

“Are we there yet?” So much theology behind four little words!

And, so it is with Habakkuk . . . cool name, but how do you pronounce it? We know nothing of him. We don’t really know the situation he wrote into, all we know is his question . . . his complaint . . . his accusation: “How long, O Lord, how long? I cry for help and you will not listen.” And, there’s the crux of the problem . . . the theological problem . . . a problem that Habakkuk is bold enough to voice . . . it’s a God-sized problem: the world’s going to wrack and ruin . . . there’s injustice everywhere . . . there’s violence all around . . . there’s greed and corruption . . . the church is fragmenting! Well, that last point was not quite Habakkuk’s concern, but still his lament is our lament . . . if we are bold enough to make it ours: “God, what are you doing about it? Are we there yet?” There where we think we should be? There where I want us to be?

And, it does take some boldness . . . especially when we hear God’s reply! The Lord turns from the steering wheel for a second and looks at Habakkuk in the back seat and says, “You want me to do something? Don’t worry, I’m doing it . . . the Babylonians are on the march already . . . they’re coming to sort out your problems!”

“But . . . but,” splutters Habakkuk, “that’s not quite what I had in mind, “the Babylonians are the cruelest, most vicious, ruthless people around . . . they’re just going to make things worse! That’s not what I wanted! What are you doing, God?!”

I did say it takes some boldness to question God . . . to accuse God. I didn't say you'd get the answers you were hoping for . . . or expecting! After all, what is God to do when the very people God is trying to save are also part of the problem?! Sometimes the answers are not black and white, clear cut yes or no. Perhaps this rings true for you? Perhaps you've experienced this? But, perhaps you also know that the conversation has been started . . . so you may as well forge on!

As Habakkuk does . . . perhaps now with just a touch more circumspection he dares to ask again: "Are we there yet?"

This time God turns from the steering wheel . . . it's not quite a smile, more of a knowing look that God gives Habakkuk. "Soon," God says, "soon . . . in the mean time . . . trust me. Trust me."

'Soon' is not a very palatable answer for a five year old in the back of a car in the middle of the Hay plain . . . and it's often not a very palatable answer for any of us when life is not how we might hope it to be. But, 'soon' is not God's only answer . . . there is also 'trust me'. That's an invitation not a command . . . trust can't be commanded it can only be earned. Who is this that calls us to trust? It's the God who delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. It's the God who time and time again sent messengers to remind the people of God's love and commitment to them. It's the God who never gives up pursuing a relationship with us. It's the God who left eternity to enter the vagaries of time and place, who became human, who experienced uncertainty, and doubt, and pain, and temptation, and death. It's the God who rose from the dead, creating new life, not just for God but for us as well. It's the God who promises to be with us always and that nothing will separate us from God's love. Trust me.

Just as it takes some boldness to question God, it takes some boldness to trust as well, especially when it looks like nothing changes . . . when it looks like the world is getting worse . . . when it looks like our prayers are not answered. So, there are two aspects to our trust. First, we trust that, God can do something about our world . . . and secondly, we trust that God is doing something about our world. And, as we trust . . . trust that we are not the driver . . . in that trust we discover there's still life to be lived in the here and now, freeing us from being paralyzed by the enormity of the future, or being driven to distraction by a myopic quest for self-preservation.

There will be times when we will still cry out in lament, "Are we there yet?" We can't help it . . . that's our human condition. But, the driver is still driving, and even a five year old in the back seat can discover there are still things to do: a game of 'I Spy' . . . a round of car cricket . . . a song or two. And, even as we wait . . . there's life to be lived . . . there's friends to be visited . . . there's injustice to be confronted . . . there's neighbours to be cared for . . . there's births to be celebrated . . . there's creation to be nurtured . . . there's hope to be had . . . even when it looks like there's no hope, and no change, and no future . . . there's hope to be had . . . because God is still behind the wheel.

Habakkuk catches God's glance in the rearview mirror . . . there's something in those eyes . . . and he says to himself . . . and to anyone who will listen: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength."

May those words be in *our* hearts and on *our* lips as we travel the road trip we call life.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
Pentecost 17, 2025