

When the Seagull Does Not Come

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

[Note: this sermon was born many years ago during a conversation with Harold Bryson, who through the years has served as a pastor, homiletics professor, and preaching and worship consultant. He told me the Eddie Rickenbacker story, which you will see below and which I had heard my father tell. Then Harold told me how he used that story to launch a sermon about faith in hard times. I never heard or read Harold's sermon. But the idea stuck in my brain, and years later this sermon was born so I want to credit Harold for the idea.]

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]

Most of you here today have never heard of Eddie Rickenbacker. **[slide: photo of Eddie Rickenbacker]** But when I was a kid, my father, an air force pilot, told me all about him. Eddie Rickenbacker was a famous military pilot during World War I. People called him "The American Ace" for his valiant fighting. During World War II, Rickenbacker served as advisor to the secretary of war. While on an inspection tour in the South Pacific in October 1942, his bomber plane was forced down at sea. Rickenbacker and his comrades spent over twenty days on a raft at sea. They were out of water, food, and about out of hope. In fact, they almost died for lack of supplies. One day, however, almost miraculously, a seagull landed on their raft. **[slide of a seagull]** They captured the bird, consumed it, and the nourishment of the seagull helped them last a little bit longer. Soon thereafter, they were rescued from the sea.

What a story! Years ago, when I told it to my young children, they said, "How gross! They ate the seagull!" But I love that story. Like most people I love stories where people are threatened and in peril, and, just in the nick of time, they are rescued. We all love stories when the seagull comes. Stories of alcoholics who become sober. Stories of married couples who almost split but who through counseling, commitment, and hard work, manage to patch up their differences and renew their marriages. Stories about people who get cancer but who through good medical treatment, prayers, and positive attitudes, beat the cancer. Stories about businessmen and women who almost lose their business but through smart management and

hard work put their business back together. We love these kinds of stories, stories where the seagull comes just in the nick of time and the person is rescued and lives happily ever after.
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But what happens when the seagull does NOT come? What happens when there is no rescue? When the alcoholic never becomes sober? When the marriage ends in divorce? When the cancer ends in death? When the businessperson can't turn things around and goes bankrupt? What do we do as Christian believers when the seagull does not come? When there is no rescue and no happy ending?

That's the subject of today's text. The prophet Habakkuk looks around his world and sees nothing but crisis and tragedy. God seems absent, there is no seagull in sight; no rescue is forthcoming. It's a bad time. And Habakkuk is angry, even angry at God. So he asks God why—why all the suffering and injustice in the world? Where are you God? The world is falling apart, and God seems to be on vacation. Read with me the words of the frustrated prophet:
[slide 1: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." (Hab. 1:2-4 NIV)]

Do you ever feel like Habakkuk? **[end slide]** You are suffering and struggling. You pray for a seagull to come; you pray to be rescued. But nothing happens. So like Habakkuk you cry out to God, "O Lord, Why? O Lord, how long?" I've felt that way before, and I've known a lot of others who have felt that way. People like Jerry. His only dream in life was to be a farmer like his father. He finally got his dream farm. But the first year brought drought, and the second and third year brought floods, and he lost it all. Like Habakkuk before him, he cried out to God, "Why?" Or people like Mary, who tried so hard to save her marriage, but in the end it failed. Or people like Jim and Lucy whose child got deathly ill; they took him to all the specialists, but in the end he died. Or people like Elizabeth who battled breast cancer with great hope and courage, but in the end the cancer killed her. I could tell you hundreds of these kinds of stories. Stories about people—good people, Christian people—who faced crisis and prayed for deliverance, but no seagull came.

So what do we do? What does our religion say about that? Habakkuk grappled with that issue many years ago, and through his struggle God gave him some answers. The main answer God gave Habakkuk is found in chapter 2, verse 4. In that verse God said to Habakkuk, **[slide: “But the just shall live by his faith.” (KJV)]** In the midst of pain, suffering, and crisis, God says that the just—the people of God— must live by faith. The answer to Habakkuk’s question is faith. It’s an old answer, and it’s not an easy answer, but it’s the answer God gives. When the seagull does not come, we are to have faith. We are to continue to believe and trust God even when we hurt. When our dreams die, when we lose loved ones, when there are no miracles, no answers, and God seems far away, we are to have faith. Even when no seagull comes, God says we are to go on in faith, and by God’s grace that faith will somehow be enough. That’s the kind of faith Habakkuk finally found.

In his closing words in chapter 3, Habakkuk makes one of the most profound affirmations of faith in all the Bible. Please read with me, **[slide 2: “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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength” (Hab. 3:17-19, NIV).]**

That is faith. You see, true faith loves and trusts and worships God in spite of crisis and pain and despair. **[end slide]** If Habakkuk were to write this passage today, it would sound something like, “Though my business fail, though I become unemployed, though I lose my home, though the stock market crashes, though the cancer is inoperable, though my marriage ends in divorce, through my children fail me, through my dreams die, through people hurt and disappoint me, through my health deteriorates, though my husband or wife or child dies, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, yet I will have faith. I will worship and trust and love God.” That’s real faith, and that is the kind of faith that will sustain us through our worst nightmares.

When life is cruel and unfair, when God seems far away, that’s when we need faith the most. As Habakkuk learned, the just shall live by faith. And we will discover in hard times that that kind of faith, strained as it may be, is adequate to sustain us for another day. It won’t give us all the answers—life and faith are often unclear and ambiguous. But that kind of faith will be enough to carry us through. Jesus knew such faith. While he hung on that cross and no

seagull came, he cried out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And yet, a few moments later, Jesus was able to say, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus, like Habakkuk, knew that the just shall live by faith.

Many years ago, when I was a college student, I had the opportunity to work in England. Unfortunately, it was England, Arkansas! I was a youth minister in England, my first church job. The preacher at that church had a ten-year-old daughter named Nietta. She was a fun, life-loving, sweet child. She quickly became one of my favorite persons in the church. I still remember the day she was diagnosed with leukemia. Like so many others in that church and community, I prayed, “Dear Lord, why? Why this one?” In spite of all the chemo treatments, Nietta kept good spirits. She used to get a kick out of coming into my office and taking off her wig and showing me her fuzzy head. She insisted that I rub her head before she would put her wig back on. Well, everyone in that church and community prayed for a seagull to come for Nietta. We prayed for God to deliver her, to rescue her, to heal her. And at first it looked like that was going to happen. Nietta went into remission, and things looked great for awhile. But then she got sick again. She woke up feeling very sick one day, and that evening at the hospital she died in her daddy’s arms.

I had been gone from that church for awhile but had kept in touch. Like many others I sent cards and letters to the family in the weeks and months after Nietta’s death. I had no words of wisdom. I just told them I was sorry and that I loved them and was praying for them. I didn’t hear anything from them for awhile. The family had to have time to cry and cry some more. They had to have time to hurt and suffer and ask the big questions. They needed time to work through the shock and pain and anger. But many months later I got a response from Nietta’s family. They sent me a letter expressing thanks for my concern and prayers during this awful time in their life. In the letter they were very honest about their feelings, about how hard this had been, about their great grief. But at the end of the letter, they affirmed that their faith had indeed sustained them, and then they quoted a passage from the book of Habakkuk. I saved that letter. I’d like to conclude by reading a portion of it to you.

“Dear Martin, Your cards, letters, caring, and prayers for us through this year of sorrow and loss have meant so much. We know you rejoice with us in our hope for being reunited with our Nietta in heaven some day. Meanwhile, we affirm the words of Habakkuk 3, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be on the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail,

and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength” (Hab. 3:17-19 KJV).

What do we do when the seagull does not come? When trouble is all around and we are not rescued? According to Habakkuk, we continue to have faith, for faith will sustain us. You see my friends, even after all these years, the just STILL live by faith.

[After the sermon a soloist sang “Praise You in the Storm.” After a brief invitation the congregation stood and sang “It Is Well with My Soul.”]

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