

Trying to Catch Thanksgiving
Habakkuk 3:17-19

The story is told of a certain free-range turkey farmer who was always experimenting with breeding to perfect a better turkey. His family was fond of the leg portion for dinner and there were never enough legs for everyone. After many frustrating attempts, the farmer was relating the results of his efforts to his friends at the general store get together. "Well I finally did it! I bred a turkey that has 6 legs!"

They all asked the farmer how it tasted.

"I don't know" said the farmer. "I never could catch the darn thing!"

Well, that was a turkey hard to catch, but I wonder if sometimes it is Thanksgiving itself that is hard to catch. Do we sometimes find it difficult to enter fully into a spirit of Thanksgiving?

Especially this year. Economics is sometimes called the dismal science, and so it proves to be this year. We are in the midst of a recovery, but is known as a jobless recovery. Housing starts plummeted this week, the national debt continues to soar. . . well, you get the picture. Many who have jobs worry about losing them. It's just a difficult time.

And, just to cheer you up completely, this week marks the beginning of the holiday season. A

season in which joy and celebration are almost mandated by our society, but a season in which many find just the opposite. Images of plenty, plenty of toys, plenty of joyous family gatherings, can simply magnify our sense of inadequacy, if we cannot buy the presents we want to buy, if our family is struggling with tension, separation, dysfunction.

Habakkuk was also trying to make sense of a world that did not make any sense at the moment. His beloved nation was being threatened by Babylonian invaders. Food was scarce, probably because of a drought. No food in the fields, no buds on the fig trees, and even the olive crop, one of the mainstays of the economy was failing. A spirit of Thanksgiving was difficult for him to catch, as well.

Earlier, Habakkuk has written that he feels like fish caught up in a net. Drought on one hand and the advancing Babylonians on the other. No miracle this time. No free pass. No dodging of the bullet. And thanksgiving is hard to catch.

All that had been so taken for granted, was now in question. And of course, Habakkuk, like us, responds with some questions. How can this be? What next? No easy answer for Habakkuk, or us, I suppose.

Which leads us to our Scripture passage. When all is called into question, when so much is lost, Habakkuk finds comfort in what cannot be taken away. And what cannot be taken away is God's relationship with his people.

And I think this is where Thanksgiving might find us this year. War, terror, and economy continue to dominate our national conversation.

And yet, like Habakkuk before us, and like people of faith through out the millennia, even in the most uncertain or even devastating of times, yet we find reason to be thankful, reason to rejoice.

Because we know God is with us. We know God loves us. And we know that God has a power over our lives, a power over our world, and a power over our future that no evil and no difficulty can ever take away.

Most years, I suspect, Habakkuk gave thanks for a good harvest, gave thanks that his nation was secure. But today, when his nation is threatened and the harvest not plentiful, he finds a deeper reason to be thankful, to rejoice. He finds a way to catch Thanksgiving.

*HAB 3:17 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,*

*HAB 3:18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.*

He knows as long as God is with him, at some deepest level of life, he has enough. God is with us. His steadfast love endures forever. That's why we celebrate today. That's why Jesus could give thanks before his final meal with his disciples. For even with betrayal and denial and death hanging heavy in the air, Jesus knew, Jesus knew, that God would bring a victory. And if on Friday victory looked impossible, come that first Easter morning, victory was there for all who would believe.

Certainly, sometimes Thanksgiving celebrations are simply to say thank you for good things that have happened. The Pilgrim feast after they had survived that cruel winter and the harvest had come through. Or the Continental Congress proclaiming a day of thanksgiving following the American victory in 1777 at the Battle of Saratoga, or Washington's day of thanksgiving, proclaimed in celebration of the ratification of the Constitution.

But at a deeper level, Thanksgiving is a time for us to celebrate God's presence among us in the midst of uncertain and difficult times. We can catch Thanksgiving even then.

Lincoln proclaimed a Day of Thanksgiving in 1863, not because of great victories won, but because with Lee still strong and even with Union forces under siege at Chattanooga, there was still hope and promise, for the nation, for the future. Thanksgiving not for victory, but for God's presence in the midst of the uncertainty. Thanksgiving for the promise of a new future.

And it was in the very depths of the Depression, in 1934, that the Macy's Thanksgiving Day

Parade reached new heights of popularity. Not that people had all that much, but that having little, they still knew blessing in their lives. They caught Thanksgiving.

So Thanksgiving this year invites us to look deeper. To center our thanksgiving not in the external good stuff that we as Americans so often take for granted: peace and prosperity, abundance and security. No, this year, with so much of the external good stuff now in question, war instead of peace, despite all that is out of place, yet we are thankful, because God is still in place. He is with us. He loves us. In the words of the hymn: He will guide the future as in ages past.

And you know, in difficult times, let's not forget that the calling of the church is to be the community that offers hope and help to those who find it difficult to catch Thanksgiving. Just think about it, at holidays we think of those who are alone; we think of those who do not have enough to eat.

Ann Street United Methodist Church has solved that problem, at least for this area. You do not need to be alone this Thanksgiving. . . or hungry, for we have a Thanksgiving dinner at high noon on Thursday.

Sure, what we will do is to share a meal and fellowship, but more than that, we will witness.... we will witness that because the people of God care, we can know that God cares. . . we will be a sign, that even in the midst of difficult times, there is reason to be thankful. Yes, you can catch Thanksgiving.

Catching Thanksgiving. I think of my son. He is starting a business. Right now, it's difficult. If the books his company is publishing don't sell, then his company becomes another casualty of the times. And yet Eric is optimistic, not about the way things are today, but because of the promise of tomorrow. It's the kind of faith Habakkuk has.

He knows the challenges of today, but then ringingly affirms that there is the promise of a blessed tomorrow. I expect that for Eric this time is a time of Thanksgiving today. Not because today is so great, but he trusts in tomorrow.

Or to put it another way. Because I believe in God, I am an optimist.

Catching Thanksgiving. Yes we have challenges. But, let us not neglect the blessings all around as well. We are a church and community in which people care about one another. We are a church sharing faith with the next generation.

Think about the commitments represented by these envelopes on the altar. These speak of ministry and mission, hope and promise for the years ahead.

As we try to catch Thanksgiving this year, there is not a one of us who celebrates that everything in our lives is just the way we would want it to be. Both on a national level, and for many, on a personal level.

But the good news is this: God will never abandon us to what is wrong; God will never let the wrong in our lives have the final say. God does not just offer blessing in days of peace and prosperity.

No, he offers a deeper blessing than that. That in days of uncertainty, he reaches out to you and he reaches out to me. If you are in pain today, if you are hurting, I am not asking you to mask that pain; I am not asking you to trivialize its power and its hurt. I am simply sharing my faith, that even in the darkness of our lives, we can indeed be thankful.

To catch Thanksgiving is once again to be grateful for the joy and fullness and abundance we do have, rather than to dwell on what we do not have.

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And did you notice the final part of our Scripture? Musical directions... in other words, what Habakkuk has written is not some dry, dusty theological treatise. Rather, it is a hymn. To be sung. He didn't want to keep this faith for himself. He wanted it to be shouted and sung into the

deepest valley and up to the highest mountain. It is a faith to be shared. In strong voice.

And, this year as we sing the song of faith and trust and hope for tomorrow, could it be that Thanksgiving might suddenly catch us as well?