

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/Fall Stewardship Series Week 1
October 5-6, 2019
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

“First Fruits Giving: Our Selves”

Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“May you live in interesting times.” That is an oft-cited quote said to be ancient and Chinese in origin, except that it is neither. No evidence can be found that links this phrase to ancient China. It appears to be no more than about 100 years old and entirely Western (<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/may-you-live-in-interesting-times.html>). Wherever this quote comes from, one can interpret this as both blessing and curse. Interesting times may in fact be volatile and uncertain times. Such was the time that the prophet Habakkuk lived in, the author of today’s Old Testament lesson. Although his exact dates are rather shadowy, he probably lived in the seventh-century B.C., and penned his prophetic words between 640-615 B.C. Habakkuk lived in interesting times which were indeed volatile and uncertain. The superpower at that time was the mighty nation of Assyria and its capital city of Ninevah, known and feared for their brutality in warfare. It was the city of Ninevah to which another prophet, Jonah, was sent by God when he fled and went in the opposite direction, but eventually returned to do what God called him to do. It was Assyria whom the Lord God used to punish the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city of Samaria in 721 B.C. But Assyria’s might and power were waning, and a new superpower was on the rise: Babylon, whom God would use to punish both Assyria as well as the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem several decades after Habakkuk in 586 B.C. Habakkuk lived in this time of transition between these two superpowers as one was falling and the other rising. For Habakkuk, the primary question was this: Why does a just God allow evil to get the upper hand? Why does God use godless and evil nations as instruments of his divine power? As the opening verses make clear: **“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted”** (Habakkuk 1:2-4). We struggle with these same questions in our own day and age. “How can God use a wicked nation such as Babylon for his divine purpose? God judges all nations, said Habakkuk, and even Babylon would eventually be judged (Babylon fell to Persia in 539). Though God’s ways are sometimes mysterious, **“the righteous shall live by his faith”** (2:4), while awaiting salvation” (*The Holy Bible*, Introduction to Habakkuk. St. Louis: Concordia, 2011; p. 997). With Habakkuk’s words before us, today as we begin our Fall Stewardship Series, we focus on the theme “First Fruits Giving.” Flowing out of the Offertory Prayer that we have been using in worship over the summer and now in the fall, today we focus on “First Fruits Giving: Our Selves.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Leftovers – some people love them, and others hate them. It is true that you can do some creative things with leftover food, but not always. Most of us would prefer to have fresh food at every meal. If we struggle with leftovers in our own lives, why do we do this with God? It can be very easy for us to give God the leftovers of our lives: our selves, our time, and our possessions. After we’ve spent all our energy, after we’ve occupied our time with every other matter under heaven, after we’ve paid all our other bills, then we’ll see what’s left over for God. I would call that leftovers. It would have been very easy for Habakkuk, living in the midst of so much volatility and uncertainty, to focus only on himself, and forget about God. When the going gets tough, our tendency is to go into survival mode; doing what we need to do to look out for #1. Everything else – and everybody else – takes a backseat. At such times, we are

tempted to keep the best for ourselves and give God the leftovers of our lives. Truth be told, we are likely tempted to do this even when times are good. Why? Because that is our human nature: *incurvatus in se*, as the Church Fathers called it: a curving in on self. That is sin at its core. It is from this curving in on self that we keep the best – the first fruits – for ourselves, and give to God what is leftover. And so we dishonor the Lord by bringing to him the paltry remains of our selves, our time, and our possessions. In contrast to the Father’s hand that is open to us in blessing, our own hands are often clenched tight as we strive to hold onto the things of this life.

The theme for this Fall Stewardship Series is “First Fruits Giving,” and it begins with God, not us. God is the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth (Psalm 24:1). After he delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and before they came into the Promised Land, the Lord called his people to bring the first fruits of their fields before the Lord (Leviticus 23:9-16; Deuteronomy 26:1-10). Nothing was to be harvested until this offering took place. The purpose of this was to remind God’s people of their deliverance by the Lord; that he had brought them into this good land flowing with milk and honey. That’s the origins of first fruits. It is Jesus the Son of God who by his suffering, death and resurrection has become **“the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 15:20), meaning that in Jesus, who loved us and laid down his life for us, that we have the assurance of our own resurrection from the dead. This is the garment that clothes us: the robe of Christ’s own righteousness that covers all our sins. As Habakkuk wrote so very long ago: **“the righteous shall live by faith”** (Habakkuk 2:4b). The Old Testament command to bring in the first fruits of the harvest is not commanded in the New Testament. The old Law has given way to Christ’s new command to **“love one another as I have loved you”** (John 13:34-35). Paul the apostle does call on believers to set aside a collection on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2), but this is to be done not out of compulsion, but out of thanksgiving for all that God in Christ has done for us. And that is what we do: give to the Lord of ourselves with gladness, just as the original first fruits offering was to be given.

Jesus’ words in the Gospel lesson for today are a comeuppance to the sense of entitlement that we may have about ourselves. Can we humble ourselves before our Lord and Master and say: **“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty”** (Luke 17:10)? And what is our duty? This past week, we saw a real time example of what this looks like. Amber Guyger, a white Dallas police officer who fatally shot a neighbor, Botham Jean, when she mistakenly entered his apartment thinking it was her own, was sentenced to ten years in prison. Many people reacted with anger that this sentence was too lenient. But Brandt Jean, brother of the man who was killed, addressed Amber Guyger directly from the witness stand. He told Guyger that his brother would have wanted her to turn her life over to Christ, and that if she asks God for forgiveness, she will get it. “I love you as a person. I don’t wish anything bad on you,” he said to the 31-year-old Guyger, before asking the judge, “I don’t know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug?” The judge said he could, and Brandt and Guyger stood up, met in front of the bench and embraced while Guyger cried (<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/forgiveness-anger-after-ex-dallas-cop-sentenced-to-10-years/ar-AAIcUjx?ocid=spartanntp>). Is this stewardship? Is this first fruits offering of our selves? I believe it is. If God the Maker and Owner of heaven and earth did not withhold the life of his only Son, but freely gave him up for us all, who are we to withhold anything of what God has placed into our hands? When all is said and done, what the Lord desires most from us is not things, material goods, or possessions. What the Lord desires is something far more valuable. He desires ourselves; our hearts.

Whether we live in interesting times filled with volatility and uncertainty, or times of peace and plenty when there is more than enough, we hold onto this truth that **“the righteous shall live by faith”** (Habakkuk 2:4b), entrusting the first fruits, not the leftovers, of our lives into the Lord’s care and keeping. May the Lord be honored and glorified through our stewardship of his gifts in our lives for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

