

**“A Conviction of Hope”**  
**MVNU Baccalaureate 2005**  
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**Habakkuk 3:17-19**

*“Though the fig tree does not bud  
And there are no grapes on the vines,  
Though the olive crops fail  
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.”*

**INTRODUCTION**

I well remember my chapel sermon preached in the fall 2001. Many of you who will graduate tomorrow were MVNU students for less than two weeks when I preached the fall 2001 sermon.

Months before the 2001-02 school year began, I was scheduled to speak on September 12 to MVNU students in a chapel service. The events of September 11, 2001 shook us to the core on campus, as it did to many around the world. I will never forget praying with students, staff, faculty and their families as they came to this auditorium throughout the afternoon of September 11. At 6:00 p.m. Chaplain Sivewright and his staff led the campus community in a meaningful service of prayer and reflection.

My sermon theme for the Wednesday morning, September 12, chapel service changed radically. With much prayer and not much sleep, I spoke to our campus family on the subject, “Why Do Good People Suffer?” The text for the sermon was the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. All of us, it seemed, were asking questions and seeking answers regarding the place of faith and hope in the midst of evil and human suffering.

As you complete your academic work at MVNU and move into God’s next phase for your life, it seems appropriate for me to return to this theme of human suffering. Therefore, permit me to share tonight a pastoral thought on the subject, “A Conviction of Hope.”

**I. What was Habakkuk’s Hope?**

Habakkuk, you may remember, was an Old Testament prophet who was deeply distressed by the apparent injustice that prevailed in the world. He attempted to reconcile the evil of his day to the goodness and the righteous character of God.

As a prophet of God, he was concerned with the suffering of his people:

- \* Were they not the chosen of God?
- \* Why would God use a heathen nation to chastise His own people?

Habakkuk reminded God that they were not so bad as the Chaldeans whom God was using to humiliate or chasten Judah, the children of God.

When God told Habakkuk that Babylon would conquer Israel, the prophet felt that this was not just or right. Without hesitation, he asks God why He would allow a heathen and cruel nation to oppress His people?

In the midst of Habakkuk's complaining to God, (in chapter 1), he breaks forth in the midst of his search for answers with this startling affirmation (in chapter 2): "The just shall live by his faith."

God dealt with Habakkuk patiently until he could see that Babylon was being used by God to discipline Israel and that Babylon itself would also face the judgment of God. And, in those moments, Habakkuk's hope was reborn!

Habakkuk concludes his power-packed three chapter book not only with the great affirmation that "the just shall live by his faith," but with the convictional words of our text in chapter 3 verses 17-19.

### **My paraphrase of the closing verses of Habakkuk:**

When God appears silent in your work assignment or graduate school program,  
When there is no apparent evidence that  
God hears or even understands the situation,  
When all that you're working for seems lost or confusing,  
In these moments –

- \* You and I choose to believe, radically in a God who is faithful and true.
- \* We stake our lives on His promise "never leave us nor forsake us."
- \* We draw a line in the sand and, with Martin Luther, state with fierce resolve; "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God!"

Our faith, in these moments, is not based on feelings, but on the conviction that God is sovereign, and will bring good out of every situation in which we find ourselves.

Habakkuk would have expressed an arousing "Amen" to the words of the song the Collegians Chorale sang tonight:

I will trust in you,  
I will trust in you,  
When I cannot stand.  
I will take your hand,  
I will trust in you.

## **II. Habakkuk's Hope. His trust. But what does it mean today? For me? For you? Especially as you move into the workforce or into graduate schools?**

Let me remind you what it does not mean. It does not mean that we will be free from disappointment and trouble. Suffering may come, sooner rather than later, in the home, among friends, with other employees on the job, or perhaps with your boss!

It does mean, however, that NOTHING, NOT EVEN THE WORST MISFORTUNE, THE BITTEREST PERSECUTION, THE GREATEST TRAGEDY, OR DEATH OF THE BODY CAN DO ANY PERMANENT HARM OR SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE, MERCY AND GRACE OF GOD!

**This is a conviction, grounded in hope, that holds believers steady in the most unsteady times!**

In the summer following the 9/11 tragedy, Anne and I celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary weekend in New York City. Each day we were in the Big Apple, we walked around “Ground Zero.” We were overwhelmed by the huge number of pictures, cards, tributes, letters and prayers attached to anything and everything around the perimeter of Ground Zero. We paused and read many of the tributes, letters, cards and prayers.

In the midst of such grief and tragedy, I found myself singing over and over again the chorus of the old hymn:

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.  
All other ground is sinking sand.

Verse two of the song, written in 1834, seemed especially appropriate to Anne and me on this occasion.

When darkness seems to hide His face,  
I rest on His unchanging grace.  
In every high and stormy gale,  
My anchor holds within the veil.

Then, now, and in the days to come, as Christians, our hope is in Christ! By grace alone, we convictionally affirm this hope in the midst of suffering unfair and demeaning treatment from employers, other employees, fellow Christians, economic privation, social disparity, or the hideous work of terrorists.

Our hope as Christians is in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. This is what we believe!

### **III. Habakkuk’s Hope. The Christian’s Hope. How is this hope and trust experienced in the real world in which we live? What is the relationship between hope and our daily experiences?**

Anne, Stephen and I lived in Manila, the Philippines, prior to moving in 1989 to Mount Vernon. At the time, the average per capital income was \$700 a year. The minimum wage at the time was under \$3.00 per day. Yet we worshipped with beautiful Filipino Christians whose joy was contagious. Their church facilities were simple. Their homes were modest. Some of our closest friends lived in what we in America would call “shanties.” Many traveled to the market each day for food because of no refrigeration in their homes.

Yet, these Christians were joyful, because their hope was not in their government, their job, their income. Their hope was in Jesus Christ for their salvation and for their comfort. They truly believed that, “This world is not my home, I’m just ‘a passing’ through.”

Hope in Christ does not mean we will avoid or be able to ignore suffering. We know that hope born of faith is nurtured and purified through pain, suffering and difficulty. The basis of our hope, however, has to do with the One who is stronger than the suffering we encounter. The life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit is our strength.

The people of Israel repeatedly reflected on their history and discerned God's guiding hand in the many painful events. And so it is with us! Memory reminds us of the faithfulness of God in the hard times, and the joyful moments.

We, as Christians, experience the minutes, hours and days of our lives differently. When Christian hope takes up residence, it is not dependent on peace in the land, justice in the world, or fairness in the workplace. Our hope is reflected in a chorus we sing often in chapel services.

My life is in You, Lord  
My strength is in You, Lord  
My hope is in You, Lord  
In You, it's in You

I will praise You with all of my life  
I will praise You with all of my strength  
With all of my life  
With all of my strength  
All of my hope is in You  
In You, it's in You.

For the Christian, hope is willing to leave questions unanswered and unknown futures unknown. Hope enables us to see God's guiding hand not only in the gentle and pleasant moments but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness.

Why do we have this hope in the midst of human suffering? Why does trust in the faithfulness of God cause us to experience the minutes, hours, and days of our life differently? Why? The answer is given in a chorus we sang recently in chapel:

We believe in God the Father,  
We believe in Christ, the Son;  
We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
We are the church and we stand as one.

We believe in the Holy Bible,  
We believe in the virgin birth.  
We believe in the resurrection,  
That Christ one day will return to earth.  
We believe in the blood of Jesus,  
We believe in eternal life;  
We believe in His blood that frees us  
To become the Bride of Christ.

**(Chorus)**

**Holy, holy, holy is our God;  
Worthy, worthy, worthy is our King!  
All glory and honor are His to receive;  
To Jesus we sing because we believe.**

And, because we believe, each day can be a “sacrament,” to use the core thought in the 18<sup>th</sup> century devotional classic, “The Sacrament of the Present Moment.” And because “we believe,” we offer our lives to Christ as a living sacrifice, even in the midst of the evil or human suffering we experience.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I close with the words of a chorus that I pray will be your testimony now and in the future:

#### I OFFER MY LIFE

All that I have, all that I am,  
I lay them down before You, O, Lord.  
All my regrets, all my acclaim;  
The joy and the pain, I'm making them Yours.

Lord, I offer my days to You,  
Lifting my praise to You  
As a pleasing sacrifice.  
Lord, I offer You my life.

Things in the past, things yet unseen,  
Wishes and dreams that are yet to come true.  
All of my hopes, all of my plans,  
My heart and my hands are lifted to You.

#### **(Chorus)**

**Lord, I offer my life to You--  
Everything I've been through, (*or will go through!*)  
Use it for Your glory.**

May these words speak grace and peace to each graduate as you move into God's next phase for your life with a living and present conviction of hope in the faithfulness of God. Because you believe . . . !

Amen.