

**Title: Look at the Nations and be Amazed.**

**Old Testament Text: Habakkuk 1:5**

**New Testament Text: Acts 13:38-43**

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It is fitting, that our New Testament text is the first message of the first missionary of the church when Paul and Barnabas shared with the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch on Paul's first missionary journey.

As was their custom, Paul and Barnabas visited the synagogue on the Sabbath day where the prophecy of Habbakuk was read.

***HAB 1:5 "Look at the nations and watch--  
and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days  
that you would not believe, even if you were told.***

In a custom not uncommon in many places in the world, the leader of the synagogue, recognizing Paul as a Pharisee and teacher, deferred to Paul to share a word on the prophecy with the congregation.

Paul, in Acts 13, recounts History of Israel which culminates in the coming of Jesus the Messiah and he concludes his exhortation with his own interpretation of the Habakkuk Translation.

*"Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. <sup>39</sup> by him everyone who believes is set free from any judgment that remained under the law of Moses.*

*But Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you. " (my own translation)*

Paul's message is a summons and a warning. It is a summons to faith in Christ and at the same time a warning against cynicism and jealousy. And like all great sermons, the knife's edge presses against his own heart.

It was Paul who had scoffed at the followers of the crucified Messiah and was hounding them down the Damascus Road to destroy them when he came face to face with Jesus.

As a Jew of Jews, a teacher of the law and one who had been jealous for Israel, he came to recognize before the risen Christ, that without Israel, the church could not be born and that without the Church Israel's Destiny would not be fulfilled.

Thus Paul in this sermon and his unfolding ministry became an interpreter between two worlds. On the one hand he brought the good deposit of the law and the prophets now fulfilled in Jesus Christ and on the other, he laid out before his brethren, the wonder of the mission of God to draw men and women whether Jew or Gentile to himself through faith in Christ.

And in so doing, Paul defined the work of missionaries ever since. You see the work of missionaries is caught up in the to and fro of interpretation. On the one hand, missionaries leave their homes, their people, their ways of life to share the good deposit they have received to people of other countries and cultures around the globe. On the other hand, they return home to share with those who sent them and support them about the wonderful things God is doing globally through his church.

Upon returning in August for our interpretation assignment, I met with the missions committee of the Presbytery of New Hope. I arrived at the meeting a bit early and only a couple of members were in the room when I walked in. Upon entering I noted a poster on the wall that had pictures of all the churches of New Hope Presbytery. As expected there were several Westminster Presbyterian churches, an Eastminster and even a Northminster, but I was somewhat disappointed to note there was no Southminster Presbyterian Church. Nonetheless, the church name that leapt out at me was the Frank W. Price Memorial Church. It brought me up short and I said the name just under my breath, but loud enough for one of the elders seated around the table to hear. Looking up at me and in that gruff tone of a wizened Presbyterian elder, he asked:

"You know who Frank W. Price was don't you?" in a tone sure that I did not.

"Is it the Frank W. Price of China?" I replied.

"A bit surprised he exclaimed, so you do know who Frank Price was."

Indeed anyone who has opened a Chinese hymnbook should recognize that name, for it was Frank Price who had not only translated most of the hymnody of the church into Chinese, but had encouraged and translated hymns written by Chinese Christians.

Frank W. Price was a remarkable man and one of the most important missionaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in China to Presbyterian missionaries, He would return to China along with his brothers to build upon the foundations pioneered by his parents and other Presbyterian missionaries. From 1923-1952 he served as a professor at Nanking Theological Seminary and West China Union University. He served as Moderator of the Church of Christ in China and his tenure was marked by special attention to leadership development in church and society. He was friend and confidant to Chiang k'ai-shek, the supreme military commander and overall leader of the Republic of China and in 1946 he served George C. Marshall, sent by Truman to bring the warring Communist and Kuomintang parties together, as an adviser to the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the National Military Council.

Familiar with China and fluent in Chinese, he understood and empathized with China better than most. He knew that Christian engagement required dealing with the political and social crises

plaguing the nation. At the same time, however, he was limited by all the problems facing missionary work at that time. Missions as well as most institutions founded by missionaries remained dominated by Westerners. Vestiges of western privilege, colonialism and imperialism clung too close to the church and its missionaries. Moreover, like most westerners, Frank Price had put his money on the wrong dictator. In 1948 a defeated Chiang Kai Shek was driven to Taiwan by the victorious armies of Mao Tse Tung and the Communist Party.

Nonetheless, Frank Price refused to leave the country of his birth and which he loved. He was arrested and imprisoned and finally booted out of the country in 1953. When he left China, there were an estimated 700,000 Christians in China, and he like other missionaries followed closely information that dribbled out of China.

The news they received wasn't good. Chinese Christian leaders who had had close relationships with foreign missionaries were arrested, imprisoned and some were executed. After a period of calm, the state closed all the churches in the countryside and of 65 churches in Beijing left only four open and in Shanghai reduced the churches from over 200 to only 23. A political campaign was begun against Christian Pastors who were deemed "parasites" and sent to the countryside for hard labor. Yet the worst was still to come.

In the Great Cultural Revolution that swept China in the mid sixties, all religion belief was outlawed. Churches, Temples, and Mosques were destroyed or turned into factories. Holy books were burned and scores of religious followers were banished to some of the harshest regions of China to be reformed by hard labor and political re-education.

Certainly this new disheartened the missionaries who had been forced to leave, yet even at home they were hardly welcomed. Increasingly, missions and missionaries were criticized for being part and parcel of western imperialism. Academic interest in mission was at best viewed in the past tense as a shameful part of the church's history.

By the year of Frank Price's death in 1974, few believed that there were any Christians left in China. How frustrating it must have been to see not only one's life work, but that of generations of faithful Christians now all seemingly for naught. To all appearances the Church of China was left for dead.

Ah, but we serve a God of Surprises... It when things are left for dead, that he does his greatest work.

By the late 1970's, western diplomats began to press the Chinese government to reopen churches in that they claimed that the country once again enjoyed religious freedom. At first the officials balked, suggesting that it was a waste of time in that the Chinese people were now thoroughgoing materialists and Marxists and that if they opened the churches no one would come save the curious. Nonetheless, they finally acquiesced and open a couple of churches in Beijing and Shanghai. To their amazement, not only did people attend they were quickly filled to capacity with long lines stretching down the avenues hoping to enter. Moreover, it was reported that Christians

were meeting clandestinely throughout the countryside. The truth became shockingly clear that the church left for dead had not only survived it had flourished.

Since then the church has continued to grow exponentially and there has been much debate as to its actual size. Given the wildly divergent numbers recently I queried the Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a secular academic think-tank established by the government to get good information and insight into the nature of the church, what his informed estimate of the size of the Protestant church of China. He said that best estimates put the number between 40- 50 million Protestants. If one just laid that out on spectrum from 1948 to today that represents a growth rate of around 5000 persons a day.

Though amazing, such growth rates parallel growth in Africa, Latin America, and parts of India and Asia.

Now on the one hand all this is quite exciting. But as a theological educator it makes my knees buckle. Not only does it help me to appreciate what we do At Trinity Theological College, but it helps explain a survey taken by the Church of Scotland asking Asian Church leaders to prioritize in order of need how the Church of Scotland could most serve the churches of Asia. Given the need for disaster relief, the scourge of AIDS and need of medical assistance, concerns for progress in social justice, they were shocked that nearly every church leader placed their number one priority upon theological education and church leadership.

Though it may surprise those outside Asia, this response makes sense to Church leaders who see the day rapidly approaching when they may take their place in addressing the great needs affecting their regions and the world. For this to happen requires Christian maturity and knowledge: theological education.

In this task, Trinity Theological College is well suited with 250 Students from 22 nations. It has degrees offered in English and Chinese. It offers Masters degrees for lay leaders, Divinity degrees for pastors, but most importantly Masters and Doctoral teaching degrees. Teaching teachers has an exponential effect and Trinity has placed over 100 teachers in Seminaries and Bible colleges throughout Asia and Africa.

This is of critical importance for the PCUSA that has a great legacy and emphasis in Global theological education. The PCUSA funds scholars from around the world to pursue theological education. Nonetheless, of those funded to study in the USA, only 44% ever return to their native countries. In Singapore, however, nearly 100% of our students return. In this regard we served by the Singapore government that is strict on visas and further we have a close relationship with church leaders throughout Asia and we see it as our duty to return fully prepared those scholars and leaders they have entrusted to us.

Now it should be clear at this point that from the time of Frank Price returned from China to the present moment that the burden of mission hasn't lessened it has multiplied exponentially

And this brings us back to our passage: "Look at the nations and be amazed."

Yet, what is easy to miss is that both the Habakkuk prophecy and Paul's sermon are warnings. .

"Look you scoffers, wonder and perish for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe even if someone told you".

Paul's scolds his fellow Presbyterians to get in step with God; curved in on themselves, they were in danger of being excluded from the amazing things that were about to unfold. Indeed, Paul would remind us, as he did so long ago in Pisidian Antioch, that Mission catches you up in life and vitality of God for it is God who relentlessly draws men and women to himself in love and compassion. Moreover, when we step away from mission there is a corresponding depletion of the life and vitality of the church.

The Church of Sweden is case and point. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Sweden sent out more missionaries per capita than any nation in the Western World. The church was alive and thriving. Yet by mid-century the missionaries were returning and not being replaced as the Swedish missionary ground to a halt. Recently, the former Archbishop of Sweden and rector of the Cathedral in Stockholm as well as a former professor at TTC was visiting the campus and met with our faculty. During the question answer period, I asked him that on any given Sunday how many attend the cathedral for worship. Rather nonchalantly, he said around a half dozen to a dozen people. One could have heard a pin drop.

Nonetheless, before we throw rocks at Sweden, we ought first to look into our own Presbyterian mirrors. When Frank Price returned from China, the Southern and Northern streams of the Presbyterian Church had some 2,700 missionaries or one Presbyterian missionary for every 2,000 Presbyterians. As of this summer that number was down to 234 or one Presbyterian missionary for every 10,000 Presbyterians, and there is only sufficient funding for that 234 through 2008.

Certainly these Numbers are disturbing not simply for the future of global mission, but for the survival of the Presbyterian Church USA. If Presbyterian Missions be left for dead, can the church itself be far behind?

But then I'm reminded by Scripture that we are surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses. That people like Frank W. Price and the Apostle Paul and indeed our Lord Jesus Christ see the numbers and would urge us not to despair but to rise to our calling in the Mission of God and to reach out ... not simply for the sake of the world, but for our own sake.

In this there are three things we should do. The first is to pray, for we are not the author nor the power that instills mission. It is the power and presence of God that brings life and vitality to the church through our faithful response.

Secondly, we must continue to send missionaries and support them that they might use their hearts, hands and minds as an extension of our own in the great Body of Christ.

Finally, for some, it is respond to the whisper that calls one lay down their life for the life of the world; which is the mystery of sacrifice and service to God. Amen!