



“The Games We Play: Candy Land”

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Habakkuk 3:17-19

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Today is the second Sunday in “The Games We Play” sermon series. This is a fun opportunity to take a look at favorite board games and discover the gospel message they offer us. Last week Rev. Call started us out with The Game of Life, where we saw that life is not about gaining the most money and life experiences but developing a true, life-giving relationship with Christ. As Christians our life is all about a life lived in Christ. This week we continue with Candy Land. Candy Land is one of the first (if not the first) games I remember playing as a child. My brother and I often played it at our grandparent’s house. I personally had forgotten the backstory to Candy Land, so here is the “Legend of the Lost Candy Castle” as written in the inside of the box: “Once upon a time, King Kandy, the Imperial Head Bonbon and Grand Jujube of Candy Land, disappeared. It was a bright, sunny morning and to everyone’s surprise, the King and his fabulous Candy Castle simply were no longer where they should be...” The legend continues with anecdotes from the Candy Land residents, including the late, great Plumpy, Mr. Mint, Princess Lolly, Lord Licorice, and Queen Frostine, all offering various words of confidence, uncertainty, or victory, depending on the speaker. As the players, your goal is to help find King Kandy and the Candy Castle, all the while being guided along by the Gingerbread Patrol. The box reads, “You can help, too, by moving the Gingerbread Men cautiously and cleverly along the path, all the way to its end. If you do, you’ll find the King and his lost Castle and everyone in Candy Land will live happily ever after!”

This game has no strategy but is simply played by drawing from the deck of cards and moving to the corresponding color or Candy Land character space. You do not have to make any choices, you just have to follow directions. This makes it a perfect game for young children. But let’s think about the gameplay for a moment here. I am a child of the 90s, so the board game I played had Plumpy, the Last of the Plumpa Trolls. His location on the board was at the very beginning and his character space was the 9th on the path. Who else can remember making it almost the whole way to the Candy Castle, only to draw the Plumpy card and be sent back to the start of the game path? Devastating! Or how about the game starts off, a couple rounds of drawing cards goes by, just to have one of the other players draw the Queen Frostine character card? Her space was way towards the end of the path! Unless that same player got Plumpy in the next draw (and you know you hoped they would), they would surely win, overpassing all of the gameplay and leaving you in the dust. How unfair!

So by now you might be realizing that I am not drawing a cheerful theme out of Candy Land. The game board is bright and cheery, for sure, but there is more for us here. As I mentioned before, in Candy Land, all you do is draw a card and do what it says. There is no strategy and you cannot control the way the cards are drawn. What might this game tell us in those times in life where you do everything right but it still goes wrong? There are those who would say that everything will go right if you just follow instructions, if you would just pray more, and keep on believing. All you need is more faith! Doesn’t that sound trite when you are hurting? You can do everything right, follow faithfully after God, and yet things can still go wrong. This does not mean you have a lack of faith, but this is just how life is. We can affirm our faith and trust in God when life does not go as planned. We can rejoice in God who is our strength.

I will say it again. You can do everything right but things can still go wrong. This is the natural outcome of a world that is fallen, a world subject to sin and death, as well as the free will we all have. I do not think it is a stretch for each of us to see how this has played out in our lives. The diagnosis. The broken relationship. The job loss. The unexpected death. A global pandemic, just to name a few. In our passage for today Habakkuk lists several things that have gone wrong: the fig tree doesn’t bloom, there’s no produce on the vine, the olive crop withers, the fields don’t provide food, the sheep is cut off from the pen, and there is no cattle in the stalls (v.17). Talk about devastation.

I will back up a bit here to give context to this passage. Habakkuk is different from other prophetic books because instead of the prophet speaking to the people on behalf of God, we see Habakkuk engaged in direct conversation with God. Institutional injustice was running rampant in Judah. Habakkuk confronts God with the question of why God would allow the righteous to suffer while the wicked prosper. And isn’t that a question we still have to this

day? How can all of the violence and suffering we see in the world serve any of God's purposes? Habakkuk laments to God about the injustice, but God answers that God is already at work. In Habakkuk 1 God reveals that the Chaldeans (or Babylonians) will be used to punish Judah. The devastation Habakkuk articulates in our passage of interest is the result of the Babylonian invasion.

I'm going to pause here so I can impress this point upon you. The challenges and difficulties you are facing are not God's punishment upon you. I want to raise a clear distinction from the biblical context and the content of this sermon. Hear me again. The challenges and difficulties you are facing are not a divinely appointed punishment. There are those who would say it is, but I am here to say it is not. The God I know, love, and serve does not operate that way. God is not exacting vengeance on you. God is not unleashing wrath on you. God is not punishing you. Are we clear on that? Excellent.

Let's think back to the examples given in our passage today. You plant a tree in the hopes that it will bloom. You plant crops in the hopes that they will produce bountifully. You have sheep and cattle as a source of food, income, and clothing material. Those farmers planted everything just right, tended for their animals just right, but devastation still happened. In Candy Land, you can be nearing the Candy Castle just in time to draw a card that sends you back to the start. In life, you can be plugging along and in an instant everything changes. How do we respond in moments like this?

Do you stay positive? Do you put on a happy face and continue as if nothing is going wrong? A concept that I have heard a lot about recently is "toxic positivity." In an article about toxic positivity, clinical psychologist Dr. Jaime Zuckerman states that "Toxic positivity is the assumption, either by one's self or others, that despite a person's emotional pain or difficult situation, they should only have a positive mindset or 'positive vibes.'"¹ Toxic positivity can be expressed in statements like "just look on the bright side" or "be grateful for what you have." The article continues to say "with toxic positivity, negative emotions are seen as inherently bad. Instead, positivity and happiness are compulsively pushed, and [authentic human emotional experiences](#) are denied, minimized, or invalidated."² Toxic positivity attempts to push away the negative emotions we feel, emotions that are completely normal to our human experience! Think about it in terms of Candy Land. "Aww, you've drawn a card that sends you backwards. At least you get to spend time near the beautiful peppermint forest. All these spaces around you have such bright, lovely colors!" Doesn't that sound silly? So why would we think to justify saying to a recent widow or widower, "Well, at least you had them for over 50 years. That is something to be grateful for." Or, "You didn't really like that job anyway, so there's the silver lining!" Whether we are saying it to ourselves or saying it to someone else, we need to allow ourselves to feel. We can be sad. We can feel devastated. We can feel lost. We can grieve. We can lament and cry out to God. We do not have to pretend that everything is okay. That is not a healthy way to process when things go badly.

So what can we do when we do everything right but it still goes wrong? Let's look again at our scripture passage from Habakkuk. "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights." Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. This is not asking you to rejoice for your circumstances or the situation you find yourself in. We see Habakkuk here affirming that despite the devastation, despite the loss, he will rejoice in the Lord, the God of his salvation. "Yet" is a powerful expression of faith. You may not yet see the fruit of your faith, but you can be confident in who God is and what God is doing on your behalf. You cannot see what God is doing yet you believe in the saving power of God. You know what God has done in the past and you believe that God is capable of doing it again. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. This does not make light or negate what you are going through, but it roots you in the God who knows, sees, and saves. "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord" is an affirmation of trust and faith.

When we experience times of challenge and difficulty, it makes us feel pretty weak and powerless. Thankfully, we have a source of strength. Habakkuk affirms "God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights." The Lord God is our strength. The strength we have in God is unshakeable, unwavering, and steady. God's constant presence with us provides stability and bolsters us. We can affirm that God's grace is sufficient for us, that God's power is made perfect in weakness. We can affirm with the Apostle Paul that "whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10) because it is the power of Christ dwelling and working within us.

¹ <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/toxic-positivity-during-the-pandemic#What-is-toxic-positivity?>

² Ibid.

It is God's strength rising up within us to help us overcome and make it through. Will we necessarily feel strong and powerful? No. But we have the trust and assurance that God is our strength, just when we need it. And that is something we can rejoice about!

In addition, Habakkuk describes what God does for him. He says "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights." Let me tell you, I do not typically feel that graceful or agile. But what I can affirm is that when we trust in God, when we rely on God's strength, God empowers us to do things we never thought possible. God gives us the confidence and agility to move forward in faith. God gives us the wisdom and clarity as we move forward. And even if that next step is not clear, we can take the next faithful step, knowing that God is present with us, strengthening us, encouraging us, and pouring out grace upon us. God makes it possible.

So how do we practically do this? How do we actually live this out in our lives? First, lay it all out before God. When we go through these experiences and feel all of these emotions, when things do not go as planned, tell God how you feel. Tell God about your pain, your hurt, your grief, your lament, your anger. God is big enough to handle and receive all of the big emotions that we feel. There is no point in sugarcoating it before God. Be honest with what you are feeling and experiencing. Pour out your heart before God. And this can be an ongoing conversation between you and God. Secondly, though, we also need to create space to quiet ourselves and listen for God's response. We give it all to God in prayer and then listen for God to speak to us. We allow God to work in God's time. We can remain attentive to God as we go throughout our day because sometimes God speaks to us in ways we do not expect. It can be through another person, something you read, something in nature, anything, really. Be attentive to God speaking to you. Finally, root yourself in God's word. Read scripture and find a passage or verses that anchor you in God's promises, like the one for today. It affirms that "yes, things are terrible" but also affirms who God is and what God does for us. We all need those nuggets of scripture that dwell in our hearts so when we go through difficult times we have something that roots us in God, that gives us perspective and hope. And from there? We put our trust in God to work out what we cannot yet see. We affirm our faith in God's goodness, God's faithfulness. We recall that God is always with us, that the Spirit intercedes for us when words fail. We remember that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God. We call to mind that we do not need to muster up strength on our own. And we rejoice. Yet we rejoice in the Lord. We will rejoice in the God of our salvation. The Lord God is our strength, now and always, in all of life. Amen.