

Pastor's Message – 11/6/2022

Luke 20:27-38

Haggai 1:15*b*—2:9

As I was going to St. Ives,  
I met a man with seven wives,  
Each wife had seven sacks,  
Each sack had seven cats,  
Each cat had seven kits:  
Kits, cats, sacks, and wives,  
How many were there going to St. Ives?

The Sadducees with whom Jesus is having a discussion in our gospel reading from Luke today don't believe in the resurrection, so they are asking Jesus a riddle in an attempt to discredit Him and make Him look like a fool so that people will stop following Him.

But even today people ask the same kind of questions, "Is there a life after death? What is heaven going to be like? Will it be a place with streets of gold? Is it a house with many rooms? Is it a state of being unlike anything we know in this earthly life?" They may not be asking to discredit Jesus or deny the existence of God and heaven, but I wonder if they, like the Sadducees, are missing the point. The truth is none of us know the answers to these questions.

The Sadducees frame their question around an absurd hypothetical riddle, but today's reading and their question isn't ultimately about marriage. It is about the themes of resurrection and the age to come. These two themes were bedrock to the teaching of Jesus. A major theme of Jesus' teaching is about the Kingdom of God already here and about how existence in the realm of God is utterly unlike the world we know and live in.

There are times when people can't see beyond the world they live in. There are times when people can't or don't or won't see God at work. There are times when people doubt the presence of God. There are times when people give up on God's ability to restore or transform the way things are into the way things can and will be.

It was such a world into which God spoke through His prophet, Haggai. The southern kingdom of Judah had held out longer than the northern kingdom of Israel, but still had ceased to exist as an independent nation in 597 B.C. when the Babylonians dominated Judah and deported a large group of her citizens to Babylon. Two more deportations followed, one in 587 when Jerusalem was destroyed, and another in 582.

The people of Judah remained in exile until 538 – for 70 years! A year earlier, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and now the Persians, having a more humane policy, gave the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem and even agreed to finance the rebuilding of the temple. Not only that, but they restored to the Jews the temple vessels of silver and gold that the Babylonians had plundered.

Naturally, those Jews who chose to return to their homeland set out with some appreciation for the Persians, but they still weren't free. They remained subjects of the Persian Empire. And the Jerusalem to which they returned must have been a heartbreaking sight. The

city walls were down, rubble lay heaped where homes had once stood, and the temple, the heart of Judah's religion, was destroyed.

Within the first year of coming back, the returnees made a halfhearted attempt to clear the temple foundations, but they soon lost interest and instead went to work on their own homes.

Who could blame them? Things really weren't going very well. The people had to struggle daily just to get enough to eat. Their economy was in shambles, and the nearby Samaritans were hassling them. Dealing with harsh realities of daily existence occupied most of their time and energy.

Haggai was one of what is known as the "lesser prophets." These are the prophets who wrote the twelve short books at the end of the Old Testament, starting with Hosea and ending with Malachi.

Haggai prophesied in the period when the exiles were returning to the promised land of their ancestors. It was to these returned exiles that God sent Haggai to Judah to deliver messages to the war-weary refugees. Haggai had himself been in exile in Babylon and was thus among those who were allowed to return to the Promised Land.

When Haggai made it to Jerusalem, he was disappointed to discover that those who had stayed in the land during the period of exile, as well as those exiles who had arrived home ahead of him, had given little to no attention to the task of rebuilding the temple.

So, the message of Haggai was to try and motivate the returned exiles to not forget that as they got their lives going again, they needed to be sure to adhere closely to God's laws, and they needed to be faithful in their worship of the Lord.

Even though they were busy reclaiming their land and rebuilding their homes and their businesses, they should also be sure to take time to rebuild the temple so they could resume the practice of regularly worshiping God there.

What the people did was understandable. They came home to destruction. Everything they had known was gone. Rubble was everywhere, and the land had not been cultivated in more than sixty years. The people were continuously plagued by drought and hostile neighbors. They were in survival mode.

So, in the midst of this, Haggai's message to the people from God was a simple one: Make God a priority in your lives, and goodness will follow.

Those in the communities we serve may not be in the same kind of survival mode that the Jewish people were in (or maybe they are!), but no matter what the situation, we can all understand survival mode. Because we've all experienced it at one time or another.

Survival mode. When you are in it, you don't have time to think about making the worship of God a priority in your life or taking time away from your already over-crowded schedule to help rebuild the temple.

When you're in survival mode, you barely have enough time or energy to get the basic necessities done. So, you certainly don't have extra time to give to the service of the church. And yet, that's just exactly what God, through Haggai, asks of the people of Israel.

God says, in essence, "Don't tell me you don't have time. Make the time. Because taking time to worship God, taking time to serve God and serve others, is not optional."

The chief calling of Haggai was to provide encouragement to those who had returned that

something even more glorious could arise from the ruins of the temple they had so far not been able to rebuild, if they would trust God's provision and get to work to restore the ruins (verse 4).

They needed to get over the discouragement caused by living in ruins and, as we can learn from Nehemiah, from multiple attempts by outside forces to stop their rebuilding efforts, and simply get to the work. As they did, the prophet promised, God would surely provide what they needed to complete the task.

Just looking around us, it should be perfectly clear to everyone that God provides. And clearly God doesn't just provide the bare bones necessities.

God provides abundantly! God shakes the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and God shakes all the nations, so that the treasure of all the nations comes and fills God's house with splendor—the silver and the gold are the Lord's, and prosperity and peace is given to all of God's people.

There is no doubt that each of us have challenges and difficulties in life; we live in a broken world of sin. Each of us have a personal prophecy, an anticipated plan, a blueprint of how we expect and want our lives to play out. This plan becomes our internal barometer that we use to measure our success or failure. But let's face it; we cannot possibly map out our entire history before it happens. The same is true for the church.

The key, both individually and corporately, is our willingness to stay the course and to work toward a goal that we cannot see, and that may never be revealed in this lifetime. "Who among you," Haggai asks, "have seen this house in its former glory?" Congregations sometimes get caught up in wistfully remembering "how things used to be." They're afraid of change or discouraged and demoralized when things do change. But, you know, if you let God shake the heavens and the earth, yes it will be different, but it will also be better.

When Haggai came onto the scene in 520 B.C., 20 years or so after the return from exile in Babylon, he observed: "Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages, earn wages to put them into a bag with holes" (Haggai 1:5-6).

Haggai has the word of the Lord, and he tells the people they have their priorities wrong. Speaking of the temple, he says, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house [i.e., the temple] lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4). No, he says, they should first rebuild the temple, take care of God's house, and then turn to their own comforts.

To those in our congregations who would say, "I don't have time right now to serve on a committee" or "I don't have the money to make a pledge to the church" or "I don't have a free night to attend a study group" or "I don't want to spend an extra hour at church every Sunday going to Sunday School" or "I don't have time to rebuild that temple while I'm trying to rebuild my own life because I'm in survival mode," through the prophet Haggai, God is saying to them and to all of us, "Be courageous and make the time."

The message for us today is not so much about the Temple, about the physical building that we call church, it is about being the church of Jesus Christ, about being followers of Jesus and about being God-worshippers. It is about doing the important work of disciples and being the

Church that God calls us to be.

- It is important to make time to worship the Lord God all the time, but especially during the difficult times.
- It is important that our members take not just minimal care, but really GOOD care of the people of the Church.
- It is important to make room in our busy schedules to serve God and love our neighbors.
- It is important during this season of Thanksgiving to give thanks for God's abundant care of us.

Find the courage, find the time in your busy, busy lives to stretch yourselves, to push yourselves beyond your comfort level and make time to worship your Lord. And in return, says the Lord of Hosts, I will fill you and your house with a greater peace, greater splendor, greater prosperity, than you've ever known.

Pay close attention here to the prophet's words: "Speak now to the leaders of Judah and to the remnant of the people and say, 'Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage. Take courage, all you people of the land. Work, for I am with you, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you. Don't be afraid.'"

Because once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former. And in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts" (2:3-9).

Haggai promised future prosperity and that "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former..." (v. 9) but that promise could probably only come true when the naysayers and the complainers stepped aside, those who say eternal life will be "just like this life, only longer."

Jesus talked about the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand. By this, he meant that the Kingdom is already in our midst and a person should live as part of God's kingdom in the here and now. We too must look at what God can accomplish in our midst here and now. Trust and faith in God and in God's goodness will teach us that the present is good, despite what others tell us they see, and that the future will be glorious.

Haggai offers encouragement from the word of the LORD. Be strong. Be courageous. Be confident. Get to work. Appearances are certainly discouraging. God's promise is not. Some of you know this place had been glorious. Be part of God's promise to make the new temple more glorious than what came before it.

God is a "God, not of the dead, but of the living; for to Him all of them are alive." What is is not what will be. What is to come when we trust God is not more of the same, not the current state of things, only longer, but better, brighter, more loving, more holy, more exciting, more successful, more God-filled than we can even imagine.

Be strong. Be courageous. Be confident. Keep at it. God is gonna shake things up and you ain't seen nothin' yet.