

“Work, For I Am With You”

Haggai 2:1-9

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I.

This morning, I'd like to speak to you about hope. Lots of people believe that hope is hard to find in our world, but I think it really is a matter of knowing how to look for it. Or, *more* importantly, realizing that sometimes we have to look for hope in the most unlikely of places.

In the fifth century before the birth of Christ, the region we know as the Middle East was undergoing a great deal of change. Cyrus the Great, king of Persia (now Iraq) had conquered Babylon (now Iran) and released the captive Jews who had been held there in exile for 70 years. Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar governor of the restored Judah and encouraged the remnants of the nation, some 40,000 people, along with Joshua, the high priest and an original captive, to return to their land and rebuild the temple at Jerusalem.

II.

As is the case with many political administrations charged with the task of nation building, or *rebuilding*, things got bogged down quite a bit by the reality on the ground. 37 years go by, Sheshbazzar, the political leader, and Joshua, the spiritual leader, only manage to get the *foundations* of the temple built. Then, in the year 520 BCE Darius, the new king of Persia, replaces Sheshbazzar with a new governor: Zerubbabel. It is in this time of transition, and in this historical moment of opportunity, that the prophet Haggai steps onto the scene.

Reading from the book of **Haggai 2:1-9**

(3rd last book of the OT, after Zephaniah before Zachariah):

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month,
on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD
came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel
son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak,
the high priest, 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, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens & the earth & the sea & 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, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

III.

Although a rather obscure person in the cast of biblical characters, Haggai had a *huge* impact on his nation. During 70 years of exile Judah had surrendered much of its cultural and religious identity. They had lost a sense of national purpose, and they desperately needed a focus and center for their spiritual lives. In the span of three months Haggai delivered 5 addresses, gathered now into this one OT book, which spoke a message of hope to the political leader, the spiritual leader, and the people of his nation.

The aim of these addresses, of which we heard but one this morning, was to chide, convince, motivate, and support the governor Zerubbabel, the high priest Joshua, and the remnant of a once great nation, to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem so that it might serve as a physical embodiment of God's promises to them, and be a necessary first step in the restoration of their nation.

IV.

Now Haggai was a person who, like many of us, probably went from day to day just minding his own business and trying to do all the things his life required. But, one day God speaks to Haggai and says, "*Time for a change, my man, the people need to hear a message of hope. And here is what I want you to do...*". If we look carefully at what God wants Haggai to say we discover three important things:

1. Take courage!

Meaning, this is going to take awhile, but we're going to get this thing done; this nation will shine again, I promise.

2. My Spirit abides with you!

While this is happening, you are going to have to keep it together and "Do not fear." Not that this won't be hard, not that we won't have to face fearful things, but as we move through these changes and challenges, don't ever get yourself into the habit of being fearful. God says, I'm with you on this ride; my Spirit is going to dwell with this nation each and every day.

V.

The third thing, however, is what most interests me the most. God says...

3. All of you will have a role to play in what I'm about to do.

Now, unlike just about any other prophetic proclamation in the bible, the one in today's reading is addressed to three *specific* areas within the nation. We may conclude from this that God understands that for the nation of Judah to get back on track, the absolute first step is rebuilding the temple. However, in order for this to happen the *political* leadership, the *spiritual* leadership, and the *people on the ground* all need to start working together. If they won't, or until they do, "*ain't nuthin' about this nation gonna change.*"

VI.

It is at this point that we must diverge a bit from the Biblical narrative. Haggai was speaking to a nation which intentionally blurred the line between governmental institutions and religious institutions. In contrast, we live in a nation where such a line of distinction is purposefully and ardently maintained as ours is a country founded upon the notion of an explicit separation of church and state. Given this, how is it that we could ever advocate for the building, or rebuilding, of a temple which serves both as a practical center of religious practice and also as a symbol of political identity and ideology? More to the point, should we even try?

It would be tempting, as I'm sure was the case with those held captive for so long in Babylon, to look back on their former religious life with equal parts nostalgia and rose-colored glasses, for us to recall a time in our own history when we were a "Christian nation" and everyone(!?!) went to church. When social and moral norms were, seemingly, refreshingly clear and well-established.

VII.

The problem is, it is highly doubtful that such a time, place, or country ever existed. Even if it did, would we want to go back to it? Yes, it was in many ways a simpler time, if not necessarily an easier time, but it is quite reasonable and somewhat easy for us to conclude that that particular shoe no longer fits if it ever fit us at all. So, unlike the ancient Judeans, we really do not have a realistic blue print to reference or to which we can go back. Forward into the future is the only option left to us.

If there is no particular temple for us to rebuild we, essentially, have a blank slate to build whatever we wish and to do so however we'd like. Which, in most ways, presents a more formidable challenge. In other ways, however, it is incredibly liberating. Such a realization of the need to venture forth into an exciting but unknown future inevitably and quickly brings us to a crucial fork in the road.

VIII.

The United States Constitution does not state in so many words that there is a separation of church and state. What the first part of the First Amendment to the Constitution actually states is this: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*" Interestingly, no corollary is mentioned: that religion shall make no law respecting an establishment of Congress, or prohibiting the free exercise of that Congress. Meaning, whereas Congress, and by inference the government, shall in no way establish or prohibit religion, religion *is* allowed to establish or prohibit government. While this certainly *sounds* good, and is in keeping with the democratic ideals implicit in our form of government, the temple which gets built as a result of such an influence isn't necessarily worthy of the effort to do so.

IX.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that religion and religious people, and the faith of their convictions, should have no role to play in the establishment and exercise of their own government. However, rather than solely focusing on building *that* temple perhaps we should, instead, be focusing more on building our *own* temple. Certainly, as citizens, all of us must be involved both in political discourse and in the political process. Even the casual observer will note, however, that such pursuits often morph into what Linda Potter, in her work with women as a Retreat Coach, calls "Shadow Comforts" and "Time

Monsters.” Shadow Comforts are things through which we hope to find fulfillment, but only serve to obfuscate and distract us from more meaningful matters. Time Monsters consume inordinate amounts not only of time, but, also, energy; both of which are better spend *elsewhere*.

X.

Ah, but where, *exactly*, is elsewhere? More to the point, how do we *get* there? This is the journey of a 1000 miles that begins with the proverbial first step which either changes our direction, or overcomes the inertia of stasis in order to set us in motion. However, few actually recognize that such a first step is even an option which is available to us. We get swept up in the momentum of the world’s fast flowing current and never even consider the possibility of our energy being able to flow toward *other* goals, aims, and pursuits. We feel bound by the weight and gravity of the society at large, and we are duped into thinking that this is the *only* bandwagon onto which we might hop. The truth is, however, we have the *opportunity* and even, I would argue, the *responsibility* to be intentional about not only how we *live* our lives within the bounds of possibility but, also, how we *think* about our lives unbound by impossibility.

XI.

How, then, are we to think about our lives, where our energies are best spent, and how to cause that energy to flow in such a direction? The answers, I would suggest, lie with the prophet Haggai and the importance of temple building. For a people released from a generation of exile, rebuilding the temple as the focus and center for their spiritual lives was paramount in reestablishing a national purpose and reclaiming the cultural and religious identity of the people. Though certainly a great challenge, as evidenced by the 37 years it took just for the foundations, they only had to build one temple to embody both the political *and* the religious institutions of the nation.

We, on the other hand, require two distinct and very different temples: one to serve our political identity and a second to serve our religious identity. Unfortunately, the first often serves as a black hole, drawing in and gobbling up all of our time, energy, all that matters such that there is little left to build the second. But build this second temple we must.

XII.

Now, this would be an excellent sermon and text to launch a building campaign, wouldn't it? Or, at the very least, to fix our leaky steeple roof. However, the temple we seek to build is not one made of stone and mortar, but one composed of time spent and lives shared. The foundations of which are set deep into our hearts, and grounded in the genuine fondness and profound love we share for one another. The roofs and walls of such a temple aren't meant to keep out wind and rain, but provide shelter from the storms of life and a support to lean upon in times of woe and loss. The windows of such a temple are set to face the light of God's grace, the doors to swing wide open in welcome, while the furniture is the fellowship of kindred spirits which gives a place of rest and comfort for the journey. True, the actual building in which we gather is old, and grand, and beautiful, but if it ceased to exist the temple and the sacredness which abides here would in no way be diminished.

XIII.

Through the prophet Haggai God proclaimed that once again, and in a little while God will shake up this world, and the splendor of God's house shall be greater than the former. Over the span of the last 27 years, our world here on the Park has begun to shake. Not in fear, but in anticipation of the temple that God has set us to build.

I began my sermon by saying that sometimes we need to look for hope in the most unlikely of places. I truly believe that the best hope for our nation, and our world, is to be found in churches, in temples, like ours; and in people like us who believe in something beyond ourselves and who are willing to risk and sacrifice to build a temple which seeks to provide us purpose for our lives, reclaim a culture of caring for others, and provide a sacred space where we might fully explore our religious identity as the children of God.

XIV.

Be forewarned, however, that this is no modest endeavor upon which we embark, and over the span of the past three decades we've merely laid the foundation. The real building must begin, now, in earnest. Let us remember, then, the message of hope God spoke through Haggai: to take courage, hold fast to the promise that the spirit abides with us, and recognize that everyone, *everyone* will have a role to play. *Work*, says the Lord of hosts, for I am with you. Amen.