

Augusta FBC
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Haggai 2:1-9
Sitting in the Ruins

NRS Haggai 2:1 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: 2 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, 3 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? 4 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, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. 6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; 7 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. 8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. 9 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.

I know that you folks who are sitting on the Building Committee and those that have worked tirelessly in raising money for our good building program, have begun to wonder if I have chosen the wrong theme for this current sermon series, “Dead Men Talking.” After all, most of these prophets have either predicted the demise of Jerusalem’s great temple, or have looked back and said, theologically speaking, “I told you so.” The temple, of course, was not the problem. The problem was the idolatrous institutions of God’s people.

Most prophets, like Hosea or Isaiah or Jeremiah, prophesied against them as pitiful substitutes for a real relationship with God. It is still a problem for our times - assuming correct worship at the correct place, constitutes a correct relationship with God. Israel’s faith had been in the things of God, instead of a relationship with God. Let’s face it, is far easier to build, pay for, and maintain a building, than to nurture, build, and care for a relationship. The Temple, for most of the prophets, had become a symbol of Israel’s faith: superficial, shallow and a facade, from a living vibrant relationship.

Today, however, I share with you a little read and little known prophet in the Old Testament, that is quite unique from most of the other “Dead Men” – Haggai. When Haggai saw the charred ruins of Jerusalem's mighty temple that King Solomon built centuries earlier, he knew it was imperative that a new temple take its place. He goes against the grain of traditional prophecy and calls for a building program.

A funny thing about temples - houses of worship: from the moment the first cornerstone is set in place, they are doomed. All temples made by human hands are temporary. They are not eternal. They have a definite life span with a definite end. In fact, Israel has had a total of three temples, none of which are standing today. Make no mistake about it, even this grand edifice that we and much of the region admire, will one day not be here. Humbling thought isn't it? Some temples die of natural causes, they just cease to exist, as the members die out.

Some die by "violent assault of predatorial forces, that are bent on hate, revenge and zeal to purge all heretics and barbarians," i.e., the ruins of Glastonbury, FBC Eatonton.

But most temples die out because of neglect - they rot away, like West Maple or become encumbered with idolatrous baggage, like our convention. Some temples become so tradition laden, that they are no longer relevant to those outside the temple. Temples are intended to be an external symbol of our internal relationship with the Holy. It is a real blow when one’s temple is in shambles.

Haggai speaks to a people who are literally sitting in the ruins. Solomon's Temple, which had stood for centuries, was now a pile of rocks. Look again at the third verse: *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?* (2:3) That is such an emptying phrase – is it not in your sight as nothing. It bespeaks humiliation and forsakenness. It reminds me of that haunting verse from Psalm 102:7 - *"I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop."*

Haggai is addressing the anguished question of, what do you do when you feel as nothing, when your known world can no longer be relied upon, when the structures or institutions of security prove to be empty, fleeting or worthless? What do you do when you are sitting in the ruins of your life, and all you want to do is to lie down and give up?

Haggai says two things: First, Take Courage. Three times in verse four the LORD says through Haggai to "take courage." When you feel "as nothing," courage is fleeting. God's people in this story are no different. Secondly, Work: There is a time for passivity and there is a time for engagement. Now is the time to move forward. What is most important to Haggai, is not how the people of God are working, but how God is working. This is what I want to focus on for the remainder of this message.

God is Working by God's: 1) Presence (v.4) *"I am with you"* – This is a promise of presence (incarnation).

Haggai, with his emphasis in Temple rebuilding, has much more in mind than simply a building campaign. He is prophesying to the people of Israel that God – Yahweh – longs to be with his people. The years of judgment are over. The exiles are returning home and God wants the children of Israel to know that He is still their God and they are still his people. A tangible symbol of that promise will be the Temple.

Do you know what this means? Because God is with us – not simply as a historical claim, or a theological construct, but really with us, interacting in our lives – we can cope with anything that comes our way. We are no longer on our own.

This should radically and dramatically change the way we look at life and at others. We should see Jesus all around. There is a marvelous story in the 12th chapter of the Gospel according to John, where some Greeks approach the disciples of Jesus. We don't really know anything else about them, other than the fact they are spiritually hungry. And they have this one request to one of the disciples: *"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."* These words were engraved on the pulpit of one of my previous pastorates at First Baptist Church Chickamauga. These are not just words for preachers and apostles, but expressions of a hunger directed towards all who carry the name of Jesus.

God is working through: 2) Empowerment (v.5) *"My spirit abides among you."* This is a promise of empowerment. No building program – spiritual or physical – will amount to anything apart from the empowerment of God's Holy Spirit.

God is working for their: 3) Future. God is working for you. From verse 6 onward, God reminds the people, that ultimately, God is working on their behalf. I will shake the heavens...I will shake all the nations...I will fill this house...I will give... Oh sure, we work, we believe, we trust, but in the end we exist because God is working for us. In Haggai we are reminded that God is far more interested in our future than our past.

Temples, by the way, do not have to be simply houses of worship. It can be our body, our family, our home, our political convictions. It can be almost anything that holds a special place in our heart and mind. What do we do when our dreams are swept away and beliefs are challenged, when those things we depend so heavily on, our family or work - when our temples are taken away from us, when divorce meets our family or your parent passes away or you lose your job or your church changes? Do you sit in despair and anguish

(Psalms of lament)? Do we become bitter or cynical? Or do we heed Haggai's call, to get up and build again? Look ahead and build anew and start a new future?

Now, there are some that don't want a new future, but want things just like they were. Sixty years prior to the writing of this prophet the former Temple (the great and majestic Solomon's Temple) was destroyed by the Babylonians. Now they were rebuilding it and it seems some of the "old-timers" didn't like what they were seeing. *3 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?* They remembered the good ol' days when times were better, but for Haggai, that is immaterial. "The old ones forget that it was not Solomon, but God who filled the temple with glory..." (Elizabeth Achtemeier).

Some just want things to be as they used to be. It's tough to have confidence that, as God has worked in the past, God will work to bring about a new future. "The task of each generation is to take courage in God's goodness and to work on behalf of God's purposes." (W. Eugene March). The work of God's people always point beyond the present moment.

Are you sitting in the ruins? Maybe you have made the mess you are in. Without a doubt, many of the messes and ruins we slog through in life, are due at least in part out of our own negligence, consequences from bad choices. And yet, there are times we find ourselves in the ruins, because of the decision and choices of others.

The good word from God that we hear through the dead man, Haggai, is for us to: Take courage...work...God is with us...God's spirit abides with us...God is working on our behalf...and God is far more interested in our future than he is our past.

The Lord of hosts is about to act once again. *6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; 7 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.*

When God acts, it shakes our foundations, it shakes our tightly held traditions, it shakes our institutional thinking, and drives us to see God in newer and expanding ways. For Haggai, God cannot be contained, not even in the Temple Haggai is leading to rebuild. God is working, living, changing, acting. God is vibrant. God is dynamic. God is moving.

And because God is moving and shaking foundations, "the people of God, then, walk always on the edge of discoveries...any day there may be new workings of divine power." (Elizabeth Achtemeier)

God needs dedication to the task at hand, not nostalgia for the past. It seems God is always calling on us to do something new, something different, something that we have not done before.

We can no longer sit in the ruins. What creative work awaits your bidding?