

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 6, 2017

## **The House God Is Building**

Haggai 1:1-5, 8-15; 2:1-9 1 Peter 2:4-6

### **Intro to readings:**

By the time the prophet Haggai comes onto the scene,  
things have changed dramatically for the people of Israel

The leadership of Israel — that is the priestly and political classes —  
have been living in exile in Babylon for nearly 70 years,  
long enough to have a couple generations of children  
and to raise them in a foreign land.

Meanwhile, back home in Israel,  
the people who were left behind have moved onto the land  
and into the homes of the exiles.

Jerusalem had been the major market and trading center of the region,  
but after its destruction by the Babylonians,  
there had been nothing left to do but turn to the land,  
and it was not the best for agriculture.  
Still, the people got eked out a living  
growing grapes for wine and olives for oil.

Of course, the more things change the more they stay the same,  
so these new land arrangements with this agricultural economy  
resulted in an entrenchment of the wealthy against the poor.  
Hoarding is human nature,  
and those with power and wealth use it  
to gather more and more power and wealth to themselves.

But now, an new empire has come onto the scene.  
Persia has conquered Babylon,  
and the Persian King Cyrus has issued an edict  
to allow the exiles of all the nations Babylon conquered to return to their homes.  
He even sent them home with money to invest in rebuilding their cities and their temples.  
The Persians were a good bit smarter than the Babylonians, apparently,  
and understood that thriving local economies  
would be able to send more tribute back to the Empire.

It's not hard to imagine the awkward conflicts that inevitably arise  
when families who have been gone for 70 years return home  
to find their former neighbors inhabiting their land and houses.  
That took some sorting out,  
and some restoring of old houses and building of new ones.

And so it is into this mess that the prophet Haggai comes,  
in the second year of King Darius,  
who followed after Cyrus as King of Persia:

Haggai brings a word from the Lord to the people of Israel  
and to their leaders:  
namely, Zerubbabel, a descendant of David appointed by Persia as governor,  
and Joshua, the High Priest at the time.

So, let us listen now to the words of Haggai to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people,  
and by the Holy Spirit, God's word to us today...

**Read Haggai 1:1-5, 8-15; 2:1-9 1 Peter 2:4-6**

**Let's get one thing straight:**

There were many reasons for rebuilding the Temple in Haggai's day  
that had nothing to do with honoring the Lord, God of Israel.

Persia had a plan for economic growth that depended upon temple-centered civil societies  
in all the lands of the empire:

that is, these temples —  
whether they were to Israel's God Yahweh, or to the Canaanite Ba'als,  
Persia cared not one whit—  
these temples became the center of social and economic activity.

The territory of Judah (the old southern kingdom) was small,  
smaller than the state of Rhode Island,  
but with a thriving temple at its center in Jerusalem,  
it would become a hub for trade and a market economy.  
So all this interest in rebuilding the temple  
could be explained in purely political and economic terms.

**But let's get another thing straight:**

The God of the Bible, the God of Israel,  
the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth,  
and is powerfully at work in all things,  
not just religious things,  
but in all things political and economic.

In fact, most of the prophet's breath is spent reminding the people  
that God cares about the political economy,  
and that religion becomes pointless and ungodly  
and even abhorrent to God  
when it is safely sequestered from politics and the economy.

Remember it was the prophet Amos who said,  
*I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...*

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Justice and righteousness in the Old Testament  
have to do with power and wealth and family relations  
and the building up of a community of human flourishing.

So when Haggai calls the people to rebuild the Temple,  
he is calling them away from a purely agrarian economy  
that narrowly benefits the wealthy controllers of the land,  
and to a market and trade economy that benefits the broader community.

There is the awkward fact that it also benefits Persia,  
who has granted them freedom  
and given them the cash to rebuild the Temple,  
but that's just part of the messy reality in and through which God works.

The genius of Haggai's proclamation is to remind the people that...  
**even in the pushing and pulling of Empires and kingdoms  
and trade routes and marketplaces,  
God is still sovereign,  
God still calls for our total devotion,  
and God is still at work to bring a blessing.**

Now, if we want to reduce biblical faith to the simple question  
of whether we wake up in the morning with a happy, peaceful feeling in our hearts,  
we certainly may,  
but this kind of religion will fall far short of the biblical call  
to a robust faith that encompasses all of life,  
and in which we seek to honor God in all of life.

That's the first point for today.

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The second point is this:

By this time,  
the people of Israel no longer believed that they needed a physical Temple  
for God to be present and at work in their midst.  
God's presence with the people,  
and God's purpose for the people,  
and God's power in the midst of the people,  
had remained despite the destruction of the Temple  
70 years before.

Way back in the days of the Patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob —  
God interacted directly with Abraham and his descendants.

In the days of Moses and the Exodus,  
God spoke through Moses and was made known by direct providence  
as in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night,  
as in the manna in the wilderness, and the water from the rock.

**Only later**, with the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle,  
and later still, with the building of the Temple to house the Ark in its Holy of Holies,  
**only then did the Lord have a structure in which to dwell.**

And that man-made structure,  
was never intended to house God, or to contain God,  
but to be a visible sign to the people  
of God's presence and power and purpose  
in their midst.

It was also a reminder — and this is perhaps the most important thing for us today —  
that **God** is not the possession of any one man or woman,  
but **is known and dealt with primarily in the midst of a community.**

At first, that community was organized as a growing family,  
later as a growing kingdom,  
and after the Exile,  
as a greatly reduced and barely viable community  
of politics and economy and worship.

The re-building of the Temple for Haggai was less about the stones and mortar  
and more about the coming together of the community,  
more about the gathering up of the community in the purpose of God,  
more about the faith of the community in the God who is Sovereign  
over every aspect of life.

So point one: God is sovereign over and takes interest in every aspect of our lives,  
not just the religious, but also the political, economic, and social aspects.

And point two: God does not dwell in religious buildings,  
but in the community that gathers in and around those buildings,  
and that would continue to gather even if those buildings did not exist.

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And the final point for today:

The God who called the people through the prophet Haggai  
to come together and get to work at building up the community of God's people,  
**is the same God who calls us today *to the same work.***

The letter of 1 Peter expresses this call beautifully:

*...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house,  
to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God  
through Jesus Christ.*

In the verses just before our reading today,  
Peter calls the people to do away with the kind of behavior that destroys community:  
*Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander...*

And then he calls on the people to let themselves become the House God Is Building,  
that is, to be the community God is building,  
a community in which Christ will dwell,  
a community whose life together will make Christ known to the world.

But just as in Haggai's day,  
it takes the whole community to build this house —  
the work and the resources of the whole community.

Resources. That is just a slight euphemism for money.  
And the good news for us today is also the challenging news:  
We don't have King Cyrus or King Darius or even Uncle Sam  
giving us money to build our Temple.  
And we don't want money from the Empire.  
We want Caesar to keep his hands off our community  
so we are free to worship God according to our conscience  
as guided by God's Word and the Spirit.

But that means, my friends,  
we are going to have to stop and consider,  
as Haggai called the people of his day to consider,  
how much we are spending  
on our own houses...  
and not just our houses,  
but our trips to the beach and to Europe and elsewhere,  
and whether we are contributing our fair share  
to building up the community of faith;  
that is, the community  
of God's presence, and purpose, and power.

Turn over you bulletin and look at that number on the back:  
I'm talking about the \$120,903 number.  
Now it's always a scary number at this time of year,  
and we always make up a good bit of ground in the last four months of the year.  
But this is a big number,  
and it will not get smaller until every member of the community  
is doing his or her part.

As I said in my recent letter to you,  
the biblical standard is for 10% of one's livelihood  
to be given for the building up of the community of faith;  
the American average for total charitable giving, church or otherwise,  
is about 3% of gross income;  
and based on what I see, some of us are barely eking out 1% a year to the church,  
if even that.

Now we all go through different seasons in our economic lives.  
There are different demands on all of us at different times.

But whatever season we are in,  
when we consider what we spend on our houses, our cars, our clothes, our vacations,  
and our tuitions,

does our giving to God's house truly reflect our conviction  
that God is our Father,  
and Jesus is Lord,  
and that we sinful human beings will be utterly lost  
unless we have a way to remember and proclaim this truth  
to one another and to the world;  
and that our children and youth will be utterly lost  
unless we have a way to teach them this truth  
that God is our Father,  
and Jesus is Lord?

*Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts,  
Consider how you have fared...and  
Build this house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord...  
for I am with you...  
Yet now take courage...all you people...says the Lord,  
WORK, for I am with you  
My spirit abides among you;  
do...not...fear.*

Yes, God is building the house.

But we are God's workers.

So let's get to work!