

Rebuilding
Haggai 1:15b–2:9
Sunday, November 6, 2022

Let us pray: Silence in us, Lord, any voice but your own, that we might hear your word and do your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The stewardship sermon from the prophet Haggai: Thus says the Lord, “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine.” Amen. Pass the offering plates!

We talk every year about how stewardship is not just about money. It is about *everything we do* with *everything we have* as a grateful response to God. It is about how we use *everything* in a way that gives thanks to God – our time, our abilities, our relationships, our love, our forgiveness, and yes, our money. How do we use *all* of that in ways that say, “Thank you, God, for all the blessings that you have given me.” And how do we use them all in ways that *trust* that God will continue to provide for our lives? That is not just something that we talk about once a year when we're working on the budget. That is something we talk about *every single week*. *Every* sermon is a stewardship sermon.

But I bet that you have never heard a stewardship sermon – or maybe *any* sermon – about the prophet Haggai. We know next to nothing about Haggai. We don't know how old he is, where he's from, who he is descended from – things that we know about all the other prophets. What we *do* know about Haggai is *when* he prophesied. Haggai was a prophet in the year 520 BC, from August 29 to December 18. So what we *do* know about him is *super* specific. Now why does that matter? Because *when* he was prophesying tells us about the people he was prophesying *to*. And *that* is really important.

In the year 587 BC (67 years before Haggai), the Babylonians invaded Israel, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and sent a lot of the people of Israel off to live in exile in foreign lands. That exile lasted almost 50 years, until Persia defeated the Babylonians, and King Cyrus of Persia issued an edict that allowed the people of Israel to return home and rebuild the temple. But it wasn't some great big grand homecoming. It was little by little. First some of them went home. Then a while later a bigger group went home. This was a people that had been traumatized and broken. Their holiest site, the temple in which they said *God physically resided*, had been destroyed. They felt like they had either been *punished* by their God or abandoned by God altogether. That God was no longer with them. Some of the people who returned to Israel had never lived there in the first place. Remember, 50 years had passed. Some of these people were born in Babylonia and had never even *been* to Israel. They had just heard stories about it from their parents or their grandparents.

So the people of Israel return to Israel, and for whatever reason, they don't start rebuilding the temple. King Cyrus in his edict said, "You're *allowed* to do this," but they don't. Their home has been destroyed. They are in political, economic, spiritual, and personal turmoil. They are trying to pick up the pieces, and they don't know how they're going to do it. They are facing a very uncertain future. Nineteen years pass, and they still haven't started rebuilding the temple. And *that* is when Haggai shows up.

Haggai says to the governor of the region and to the high priest and to the remnant of people who were living in Israel, "It is time to rebuild the temple. You've rebuilt *your* houses, and they're pretty nice. What about *this* house?" And it says that the Lord stirred up the spirit of the governor and the high priest and the remnant of the people, and that very day they started building a new temple.

A month passes by, and they've made some pretty good progress. The foundation has been laid. In the book of the prophet Ezra, it talks about how when they finished the foundation, the people stopped their work and praised God, and a great shout of joy went up from among the people. But, it says, the older people, who had seen the first temple, *wept* when they saw this one, because it simply did not compare. It wasn't what it used to be.

So Haggai says to the governor and the high priest and the remnant of the people, "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? It is not in your sight as *nothing*? But take courage, says the Lord. Work, for I am with you, says the Lord. Remember the promise that I made to you when I brought you out of Egypt hundreds of years ago. My spirit abides among you. Do not fear. I am going to fill this house with *splendor*. The *latter* splendor of this house will be greater than the *former*! And in this place, I will give prosperity."

Five years later, they finish, and the new temple is dedicated. But it was the promise of God spoken through the prophet Haggai that made that possible. Haggai's message was essentially, "Remember the ways that God has taken care of us in the past, and trust that God will take care of us *now* and in the *future*." To a people facing political, economic, spiritual, and personal turmoil, that was the good news they needed to hear. And I think it's the good news that *we* need to hear, too.

For the past two and a half years, we have been a people in exile. Separated from our families and friends. For a long time, separated from the sanctuary where we worship God together; separated from our church family. We have experienced political, economic, spiritual, and

personal turmoil. And now we have slowly been coming back. Not just coming back *here*, but trying to come back to some sense of what life was *before*. We have been trying to pick up the pieces and put things back together, but we don't always know how.

We gather here together, and we can see that a lot of us *still* haven't made it back yet. We expected this grand homecoming after the pandemic passed, and it hasn't been that. It's been little by little. And we're not alone in that. Nationwide, on average, churches are coming back at 50% of what they were before. With that drop in attendance comes a drop in giving. And when you combine that with the economic instability we are experiencing as a country, the church is facing a very uncertain future. We were *before*, but Covid has *accelerated* that.

Some of you were here in the heyday of the 50s, 60s, and early 2000s, when the pews were full. "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?" It is easy to look around and *weep* because it's not the same. It's not what it once was.

But I want you to hear the word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Haggai. "Take courage. Work, for I am with you." The church has a calling from Jesus Christ, we have a *job to do* in this community and in this world, and we can either sit around and weep about what used to be and wring our hands about the challenges we are facing, or we can get to work. Because God is *still* with us. God has not left us. "Work, for I am with you, according to the promise that I made to you. My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

The church has faced challenging times before. Some of you have been here long enough to remember, I think it was back in the 70s, when we had to sell off pieces of the church's property just to cover expenses. I've heard those stories. But because of faithful men and women who

stepped up to lead because their spirits were stirred by the call of God, we are still here today, praising and serving the Lord Jesus Christ in this community. And it is *not* because of how hard we worked or what *we* made possible, but because God's spirit abides among us.

And not just *us*, but the church of Jesus Christ has faced challenging times before. Two thousand years ago, when the church was first starting out and Christians were being persecuted, arrested, and killed, and yet we endured. Fifteen hundred years ago, with the fall of the Roman Empire, people thought, "That's it. The church is done for. How can the church survive without the empire that supported it?" And yet we adapted and endured. Seven hundred years ago, when the plague swept across Europe and killed over 50% of the population. How in the world could the church keep going when *half* of it had been wiped out? And yet we adapted and endured.

Time and time again the church of Jesus Christ has faced its demise, and yet we have endured. Not by our own doing. Not by our own power and ability. But by the grace of God. Because God's spirit abides among us. God has work for us to do. The church does not belong to *us*, it belongs to Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is not done with us yet.

For decades, people have talked about the death of the church. But our faith is *founded* on the belief that death is not the end. That God has *power* over death. Power to bring about new life and resurrection. We do not live in *fear* of death, rather we live with *trust* that in life and in death we belong to God, and God is able to bring about life in the midst of death.

We remember the ways that God has taken care of us in the past, and that gives us the courage and hope that we need to trust that God will take care of us *now* and in the *future*.

How has God provided for you in the past? How has God made life possible for you when it seemed like things were *impossible*? We remember what God has done in the past, and that gives us courage and hope for the future. God will give *you* and *us* everything we need to do what God is calling us to do. We just need to be clear on what God is calling us to do.

Eight hundred years ago, there was a 24-year-old man named Francesco Bernadone. He came from a wealthy Italian family and had lived a carefree life. He dreamed of being a heroic knight until he was taken prisoner in a battle and then came down with a severe illness. He returned home several years later and was trying to figure out what to do with his life. One day, he was walking around in the country outside of the town where he lived, and he came upon this small chapel that was falling apart. He went in to pray, and as he was kneeling under the crucifix, he had a vision of Christ, who said to him, “Francesco, go and rebuild my church which, as you can see, is falling down.”

Over the next couple of years, he rebuilt that small country chapel, along with several other churches he had come across. But then he realized that God wasn’t calling him to physically rebuild these churches that were falling apart. God was calling him to rebuild *the church*, which in that time was falling apart. He started an intentional community, where he taught people how to devote themselves to God and care for the poor. Through that community, the church found new life and purpose. That community still exists today, 800 years later, and we know its founder Francesco Bernadone as St. Francis of Assisi.

I believe that what God said through Haggai and what God said to St. Francis is being said to us today. It’s time to rebuild the church. Not a *building* but a *body*. As we come out of this pandemic, as we return from exile, we have to discern what God is calling the church to be and

do *now*. The church is not *dying*, the church is *changing*, as it has changed before. And no, it won't be what it used to be. It will be something *new*. But God is in it. The question for us is, do we want to be a part of it? Do we want to be a part of the rebuilding, the transformation of Christ's church and the transformation of *lives* through it?

Over the past two and a half years, I think that we have done a really good job at maintaining the institution of the church, keeping things going through some very challenging times. But maybe in our focus on *maintaining* the church, we have neglected what it means to *be* the church, and I include myself in that. We've been so focused on holding things together internally, that we have forgotten that we exist to be in ministry to the community and the world around us. We do not exist for ourselves. We exist for God and our neighbor, to share the love of Jesus Christ with the world around us.

I know that there has been a lot of talk lately, and frankly a lot of anxiety, about budgets and giving trends and future financial uncertainty. And what can happen is that our anxiety keeps us from trusting God. That's true in our individual lives and in our life together. We say, "How are we going to make this work? We've got to make this work!" And we forget that we aren't the ones who make this work. We live by the grace of God. This is all a *gift*. The world, the church, and our lives are not held together by our own power and ability, they are held together by the power and love of God.

And because of that, I am not worried – about budgets or giving trends or future financial uncertainty. I am *mindful* of them, but I'm not *worried* about them. Because we belong to God. We exist by the grace of God for the glory of God. And God will provide for our lives and our life together. God will give us everything we need to do what God is calling us to do. It might

not be everything we *want* or everything we have done in the *past*. But God will give us what we need to do what God is calling us to do *now*. To be the church God is calling us to be. At the risk of completely undermining our stewardship campaign this year, I don't care about the money. I trust that God will provide. I care about *you*. And because of that, I say what I'm going to say now. *We need you*.

Some good things have come out of this pandemic. One of them has been our ability to livestream services. There are people in this church who have not been able to attend worship for years *before* this pandemic. And this has helped them feel connected to the life and worship of their church family for the first time in years. For our homebound members and for people who have moved or live far away, this has been a lifeline.

But I have also heard from so many people how easy it is to get up on Sunday mornings and worship in your pajamas with a cup of coffee or to just listen to it later. And this is not a criticism. I know that feeling. When I was on leave a year ago, I did the same thing. I worshipped virtually with churches all over the country. But what I realized very quickly was that it wasn't enough. I missed you all. I missed being together. I missed singing together. I missed praying together. I missed coming into this building on a Sunday morning and getting a hug from Dave Dalrymple that lifts me up off the ground. I missed Susanne Engheta's smile and talking to Alex at coffee time. I missed Jeff Estabrook making corny jokes with the choir.

Some people can't come to worship in person, and so we are going to keep doing this for them. But if you *can*, we want you to come back. We need you here. And I think you need us. We need one another's presence and prayers and support and service. Life is too much to do on our own, especially lately. We need a church family, our brothers and sisters in Christ and the love

and encouragement that they can provide. The church is not just called to worship. We are called to share life together. We need to sing together. We need to pray together. We need to eat together and laugh together so that when we have to cry, we can cry together.

The *reason* that we want you to come back, the reason that we are asking you to give, to pledge next week, is not just so we can keep the church going for ourselves. It is so we can answer the call of Jesus Christ to transform lives in this community. To care for the poor. To bring people to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, sharing the good news of salvation with those who have not heard it. And to help those who *have* heard it grow in their faith. To help this community *know* Jesus Christ. Not just know *about* him, but *know him*, as deeply as we know and love one another.

The church of Jesus Christ has become so focused on culture wars and political power that we have lost sight of *that*, which is our true calling. We have been commissioned by Jesus Christ with a job to do. And Christ is reminding us now, today, “Work, for I am with you.” One of the ways that he is with us, that we experience his presence and love, is in this meal that we are about to share. In this meal, we remember Christ’s saving death and his resurrection to new life. And in remembering what Christ has done in the past, we find the courage and hope to trust that God will provide and make life possible now and in the future.

If we answer Christ’s call to rebuild Christ’s church, the promise that we have is that the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former. Not for our own glory, but for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So let us prepare our hearts and minds to meet Christ at this table, that he might nourish our faith and prepare us for the work ahead. Amen.