

Spare Change
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15:52

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Haggai 1:1-6, 13-2:9

Today we look at an angry nation, a nation with brutal politics and deep divisions. A nation with two sides, each deeply distrustful of the other; a nation struggling to find unity in the midst of conflict and long standing grudges.

Oh, you thought I was talking about the United States?

No, I'm talking about Israel and the people living under Persian rule as we read in the book of Haggai, a minor prophet, this morning.

"The date is about 520 BCE and the rise of the Persian empire with its policy of letting captive people return to their homelands, had given the people fresh hope. A group of people had returned from exile earlier (539 BCE) but rebuilding had not progressed much at that time. Now there was a need to refocus their lives. Much was against them. Haggai and Zechariah are called to encourage this dispirited people. Their religious and social hope had been embodied in great political events. Now, other events seem to have overtaken those earlier hopes. [And still the temple is a bare foundation.] How were these people to cope with disappointment? (Howard Wallace's homepage)

God comes to them in the prophet Haggai and says, "yet now take courage O Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, take courage, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, take courage all you people of the land, for I am with you."

Haggai and the people can look around. The rebuilding of the temple had started earlier and a bare foundation has been laid. But years have gone by and that is all that has happened. Pretty discouraging. It is not as if the people do not have the means to rebuild the temple. They are living in paneled houses according to God. (I'm not sure what a paneled house looks like but it was a sign of wealth.) But their spirit has gone out of them. The temple seems a hopeless project.

"Take courage," God says. "Do not fear. Once again in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and I will shake all the nations so that the treasure of all nations shall come. The silver is mine and the gold is mine says the Lord."

"I will shake the nations, says God." How do you envision that? How would we fare if God shook this nation?

I imagine a picture of God as the Godfather. "So, Don America, you seem to be a little behind in your payments to me. I give you protection. We have a deal. Do I need to shake you down? Where's my money?"

Or is it more a violent shaking? Imagine God upending each of us, holding us upside down and shaking. What would fall out of your pants pockets? For me I know it would be chapstick, some breath mint picked up at an anonymous restaurant, a little bit of lint and some small change. The silver and gold is mine says the Lord. Well, God isn't getting much out of my pants pockets.

But more importantly, what kind of giving does the image of a shakedown inspire. Reluctant, forced giving. The heavy coming along and reminding you of your responsibility. I imagine some people feel like the stewardship campaign in a church is like a shakedown. "How much do they want from us this year?"

Let me offer you a different image, starting in a different place.

Let's go back to the people of Haggai's time. They are still living under a foreign power. There are two factions. Those who were exiled and recently returned and those who have remained the whole time. There is friction. There is conflict. Who are the real Israelites?

The people are disorganized and discontented and are forgetting what called them together in the first place. They have experienced wealth. God says "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."

We can read this as an indication that there is hardship in the land, famine or drought. But I think instead it means that the people of God have focused all their attention on material things. What we eat. What we buy. What we drink. What we wear. And they are finding that it isn't enough. It can never fill them up. It leaves them empty, lacking, bankrupt. A bag with holes.

What is missing is an identity, a purpose. And yet their identity lies in rubble, a symbol of failure. A temple with a barely laid foundation.

And so God says, "consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored says the Lord. Then Zerubbabel and Joshua with all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of the prophet Haggai and the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel and the spirit of Joshua and the spirit of the remnant of the people and they came and worked on the house of the Lord their God."

God stirs up the people to go and work on the Temple, to build it up. Why?

The temple was a place of identity. It is where the people found the centerpiece that they were lacking. "Oh, yes, this is who we are, a worshipping people. A people dedicated to God. Oh yes, this is the center of our lives."

The temple was a place of gathering. Instead of sitting alone in their homes, however grand they were, the temple brought the people together, to work and pray and serve one another. It was a gathering place--a place to bring the people together as one to remember what they have in common.

The temple was a place to remember God. To remember that the people were formed in the image of God, that God had claims on them. A place to remember that aside from the Persian Empire, beyond the politics of the time, their lives were in the hands of God.

And the building of the temple reminded the people that the silver and the gold, the money, was God's.

And so, turning to us, this day, this Consecrating Stewards day, a day when we ask each person to pledge their money to build up the church, why build up this church, Pilgrim church?

Pilgrim church is a place of identity. This is where we come and we belong, maybe for the first time in our lives. We are part of a family. We are part of the communion of saints. This is where we get oriented. We remember, “oh yes, this is who we are, a worshipping people. A people dedicated to God. Oh yes, this is the center of our lives.”

Pilgrim church is a gathering place. A place that we come together as one to remember what we have in common. The church brings us together, out of the aloneness of our homes, to work and serve and pray together. Here we can do more, be more, amplify change more than we can do on our own.

The church is where we remember God, that we are made in the image of God. That the word of God has claims on us. That we are God’s people entrusted with doing God’s work in the world. That beyond the empires of our time and beyond the politics, we are held in the hand of God.

And the building of the church reminds us that the silver and gold, all the money in our lives, belongs to God.

“Haggai believed that the temple was something that would hold in the face of changing history. The center from which we fulfill mission to the world.” (Dennis Bracter)

That is just as true today. The church holds in the face of changing history and politics. In the face of war and gun violence. It is the center from which we fulfill our mission to the world.

So how do we build up the church? There are many ways to do stewardship, to pledge, to raise money.

- The Mormons, aside from a mandatory tithe, have a fast day, on the first Sunday of the month. Each person is asked to fast for two meals that day and give the money to the church.
- In the historic black church the offering plate is passed multiple times until enough money is given to cover the needed income. There may be three offerings in one service.
- A group of Mennonites in Indiana gather each springtime to show each other their W2 forms so that each may see that the other met their obligation to the church.
- In some Unitarian churches, those who pledge over \$1000 are asked to pledge 10% more. Those who pledge under \$1000 are asked to give \$100 more
- Some churches ask, have you given your pledge a COLA raise?

I can’t tell you what the right amount is for you to pledge. But I can encourage you to think about what you pledge beyond the loose change in your pants pocket. To take your pledge seriously. And this is why.

“Take courage,” says God. “Fear Not.”

In times of uncertainty or fear our immediate reaction is to hunker down. To retreat, to be careful, to rein in. To increase our giving in times of uncertainty is a bold faithful step in the midst of fear. It shows a faith in the future, a faith that maybe we ourselves are not even sure of. For where our giving goes, so will our heart go. And if our giving goes to God, so shall our heart be led to the heart of God. In this Interim time of change, your pledge is a vote of confidence in the future Pilgrim is heading towards.

“The silver and the gold is mine,” says God.

God is the true owner of all that we have. Everything. One certain way to remember that, to live by that, is to give the silver and gold back. John Wesley always said he gave money back as soon as he could so it didn’t own him. And that is true. The longer money stays in our hand, in our wallet, in our bank account, the greater power it has over us. If we dedicate our first fruits

to God, meaning we give to God first, we find that wealth, accumulation, does not have that power over us.

“And God said God would shake the nations.”

We do a lot of good here. The more you give, the more you are a part of it. And the more we can do. A lot of the good we do happens “out there”. We help East End house families, we gather with our Interfaith neighbors to protest racial and religious intolerance.

But a lot of the good we do happens right here, every Sunday, right in these pews. Here people hear for the first time, or believe for the first time, that they are created in the image of God. That they are forgiven, healing is possible, resurrection happens. Here, every week, in this place, people find that they belong. Here, people gather an identity. Here, every week, people are quietly transformed, and then, transformed, leave to be change agents for others. That’s why this place, a place to gather, a place we are claimed by God every week, is so important. Our whole ministry, not just to out there, but to all of us, begins here. Here we shake the nations.

I want to thank you for your stewardship in the past, for all the ways you each have given your money and your time toward making Pilgrim church healthy and alive and part of the healing work of God.

And now, looking ahead and thinking about your stewardship, your pledge for the life of this church this year, take courage. And reach beyond the change you find in your pants pockets toward the real change possible through the work of God and through the work of this particular church.

At the Congregational meeting, the congregation’s wealthiest member decided to share a portion of his faith story.

“I’m a millionaire,” he said, “and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday:

“I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a youth meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give everything I had, my whole dollar, to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.”

When he finished and sat down, the chair of the stewardship committee leaned over and said: “Wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!”

All right, Pilgrim friends, so dared.

In the name of God in whose house we stand, Amen.