

sermon-11/11/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Take Courage”
Haggai 1:15b-2:9

I bet few in this room have spent much time in Haggai. Many probably couldn't find it in the Old Testament without going to the table of contents. That is too bad because our passage for today out of that book is a great text for us living in the 21st century. It sounds so modern in its perspective.

Here is the situation. Judah was conquered by Babylon in 587 B.C. They were taken into captivity away from their beloved homeland. Persia then conquers Babylon. Under King Cyrus, and then King Darius, the Jews were offered help in returning to their homeland. In 538 B.C. only a remnant chose to return. It was a very bleak time. Things were in terrible shape. The Temple built by Solomon had been destroyed.

The first chapter of Haggai is written in 520 B.C. after they have been back in Jerusalem for eighteen years. The Temple is still not rebuilt. This is what he says in 1:4-6: “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: 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.”

There is never enough. We can earn all we want, but it feels as if we have holes in our pockets where the money just seems to disappear. We spend what we earn, but not all our wants are met. There always seems to be some luxury item, some trip, some new toy ever out of our reach. Scarcity thinking. There is only so much to go around, and you better get what you need before it runs out.

Haggai's words seem to capture a version of scarcity thinking in his day that we know all too intimately in our day. Scarcity thinking leads to a lack of gratitude for what we have. It prevents generosity to others, and especially to God's church. As one commentator wrote, the people in Haggai's day argued that the economy just won't sustain a building project.

Haggai gets them to move through this scarcity thinking. They sacrifice and begin to build the Temple. However, as David Buttrick says, once the foundation is laid the people realize this new Temple would not exactly stop traffic! It seems puny in comparison to the magnificent Temple Solomon built.

When the book of Ezra writes of this time it says that when some of the older folks who had seen the original Temple saw this new Temple, they just wept. As Haggai said, it seemed as nothing compared to the former glory of the first Temple.

Let me tell you, passages like this do not comfort any of us responsible for building projects in the church. It could give one nightmares. I can just picture people walking

into our newly remodeled sanctuary in a couple of months, and some of the congregation just standing there and weeping!

Haggai has to deal with what the people need to do when life does not fit their expectations. Listen to what he says. He says “Take courage.” He doesn’t just say that once. He says it three times. Do not fear. Don’t look to outward circumstances to give you hope. Hope does not spring from what we can see. A building’s glory is not dependent on its physical beauty. It is God’s presence that gives the Temple glory.

So, says Haggai, take the next step. Continue to work. Trust God. When we do that we realize our hope is not in our large bank accounts that can deal with any emergency or that can build beautiful things. No, our hope is in God. And it is God, after all, who is the true owner of our wealth. We are only stewards of what belongs to another. We are to use that wealth as God would use it. What would it look like in our lives if we used the wealth we have as God would use it? How would that change our giving?

One commentator says this chapter is really about Haggai’s theology of stewardship. It is simple. Stewardship is not about the latest management technique. It is about God being with us in good times and bad. It is about realizing God is the owner of all the silver and gold. And because God is in control, we can have hope in the future. When we have hope, we can be generous in the present.

Growing into a biblical understanding of stewardship is tough. It requires moving from scarcity thinking to gratitude. It requires trusting God in spite of outward circumstances. It requires adopting a whole new way of looking at our lives, our world, and our relative wealth. We don’t get there overnight. We need to be patient as we take the next step of faith.

Patience is the last word in this sermon. When we wrestled with this text in our lectionary class on Tuesday morning, we found the message to be quite challenging. Towards the end of the class one of the members, whose initials are Lyn Lambert, said patience is critical. Then she said, “Patience with others is love, Patience with self is hope, Patience with God is faith” It bowled us all over.

I asked if she just made that up on the spot. She said she probably read it somewhere. As it turns out, she was quoting a man by the name of Adel Bestavros. He was an Egyptian lawyer and ordained deacon in the Coptic Orthodox church. He died in 2005. I owe that little piece of knowledge to the detective work of another member of the class-Janis Medley.

The more I think about what Adel said, the more I realize that is exactly what the Church ought to be teaching her members. That is what the Church ought to instill in her children. When we baptize someone we are baptizing them into a community that tries to live by those words. When we can mature into faith, hope and love, we will be good stewards. Amen