

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

22nd Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 6, 2022

I Am with You

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

Following the Babylonian exile, Haggai was one of three prophets who arose in Judah after Persia became the dominant power in the ancient Near East around 539 BC. The other two were Zechariah and Malachi. At that time Jews were permitted to return to their homeland. Back in their own land after decades of exile in Babylon, the people sought to rebuild the temple, but they were fearful and their effort was half-hearted. The book of Haggai is only two chapters long. Listen to these words from Haggai 1:15b-2:9...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

The setting in our Epistle Lesson today is quite different from that of our Old Testament Lesson. Here in Thessalonica, Christians have grown agitated by false claims that the “Day of the Lord” has already come. Paul seeks to reassure them that it has not come, and they are to hold fast to the traditions they were taught. Listen to verses 1-5 and 13-17 from chapter 2 of Second Thessalonians...

Sermon

The little church in rural Western Kentucky where Bob Phelps first heard the Gospel wasn't much to look at—as he tells it:

A plain white, wood-frame building outside; on the inside, it was even simpler. Some handmade pews, a homemade pulpit and table, and that familiar Warner Sallman “Head of Christ” portrait painting was hung on the wall behind the pulpit. An old, out of tune upright piano was up front by some pews reserved for the choir, which was made up mostly of my relatives, who couldn't sing very well, and thankfully, didn't sing very often.

Phelps continues:

On one of the pews in the back, on the left side of that room, my sister, my cousins, and I went to Sunday School, even on the alternate Sundays when the preacher didn't come. There wasn't much in that room to inspire creative thinking about God or about much else in young minds. We were grateful for Mrs. Inez Ragland, our teacher, who always managed to find coloring book pages to go along with the lesson for the day. The adults had Sunday School up front, and from our vantage point they usually looked bored to death while the teacher read their lesson to them.

Mrs. Inez loved us enough to be there every week and to tell us stories about things and people that were so different than what we experienced everyday that we couldn't help but be drawn to them. That simple room with whitewashed walls and creaking floors became the Nile River when she told us about Baby Moses floating down it in a basket. That same room became the Jordan River when she told us about Naaman the Syrian washing in it, and then about John baptizing in it. It became a hill outside Jerusalem lots of times because she told us about Jesus' death on the cross for us over and over. That room was a tomb with a stone rolled away, because we heard the Easter story all year long. Paul's journeys began and ended in that room. He and Silas spent time in a jail cell that couldn't have been much more plain than what we saw around us, and we sang hymns and felt God's presence there just as they did long ago.

I have worshiped in much more finely appointed places since those days. I have learned a lot more than Mrs. Inez was able to teach me. But when I think about pure worship, worship that inspires me to think about God's love for me and for all the world, my mind often goes back to that simple little room and all those journeys my mind took in it. (Bob Phelps, *Lectionary Homiletics*)

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning we find Haggai speaking to the people of Judah on God's behalf. The listeners include the remnant who were alive before the temple's destruction and the exile, as well as some too young to have experienced the horror themselves. Now Cyrus, the emperor of Persia, has allowed the Jews to come home and rebuild their temple. But the work has languished. The commitment to temple construction has waned as people have placed more of a priority on their own houses than they did on the house of the Lord.

Of course, human hands cannot build a house worthy of the glory of God. According to Elizabeth Achtemeier (*Interpretation Commentary on Haggai*), who taught at Union Seminary in Virginia, King Solomon with all the marvelous cedar, cypress, gold, and carvings in his temple (1 Kings 6) had to pray thus before the Lord:

But will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!
(1Kings 8:27)

Yes, neither our temples nor our individual lives are adequate to contain the presence of the eternal God of all holiness. Yet, out of his love and faithfulness, this same God comes to be with us. Just so, here in Haggai, to a struggling and despondent people through his prophet, God says, “I am with you.” The covenant that had been broken by the people’s faithlessness is renewed by God’s steadfast love. God acts in human history and his word is proclaimed through human voices. And Haggai is one such voice.

Now the prophet had looked around and could see people rebuilding their own homes, but doing little in rebuilding the temple of God. But the temple was the center of the community, the gathering place of the people to worship God. It was the place where people could orient their lives. So Haggai asks the aging members of the community who remember the details of the temple of old, to comment on the work of rebuilding.

“Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?” (2:3)

Some of these discouraged older people had seen the temple of Solomon in all its glory. No doubt, a few tears were shed when they considered the present meager beginnings of a reconstructed sanctuary. The Ark with its mercy seat and cherubim is gone; the tablets of stone and the pot of manna. Aaron’s rod, the eternal fire of the altar—all have been swept away in the

Babylonian holocaust. Though substitutes may take their place, they don't have the same significance.

The next question Haggai asks the leaders of the community and their diminished flock is this: "How does it look to you now?" Many congregations when they look, feel that their best days are behind them. Those were the good old days, when the sanctuary was full and children and young people were present in abundance. Those were the days when on Wednesday evenings the Fellowship Hall was crowded with people. And good food was prepared for them.

Of course, change in the makeup and vitality of a congregation may be a reflection of the changes in the life of the individual member, family, workplace, and school, as well as changes taking place in the community, the country, and the world. Who remembers this house in its former glory—a glory that now seems faded.

The final question Haggai asks is this: "Is it not in your sight as nothing?" That question is asked of a people who have come back from captivity, enslavement, and exile. They are free to rebuild their community, but they scatter, each to his or her own project, each to care for me and mine. They forget about the importance of the temple and the core values the temple stands for: praise and worship of the God who set them free; love of God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength; love and care for neighbors, as you love and care for yourself.

So Haggai is not simply calling the people to rebuild the temple as a building, he's calling them to rebuild the worship of God and to rebuild the community of the children of God. So that it becomes a community of prayer and healing, of almsgiving and sacrificial love.

Happily Haggai then tells the people that they are not alone:

Take courage all you people of the land; work, for I am with you,
says the Lord of hosts. (2:4b)

Whatever may befall us, whatever the quandary of the day, whatever the election results this Tuesday, we have the assurance that God will be with us. Take courage, for I am with you.

We hear a similar word in our Epistle lesson where Paul says to the Thessalonians:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. (2:16-17)

Yes, the building of the house of worship and community of faith takes *work*. It doesn't just happen. And many of you show your willingness to work—to work to carry out a Christmas Bazaar to provide funds to help homeless and foster children in Anderson District 5. At Thanksgiving you give to Thornwell Home, so that children have a secure and loving home and hope for the future. You offer time and energy to serve as an officer or as a member of one of our committees. You teach Sunday School or sing in the choir. Who would have believed a year ago that we would be the home of Upstate Hybrid Home School?

The building of the temple and the community takes work, declares Haggai. But remember, God is with you. And God is with us when we roll up our sleeves and go to work.

Work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts. (Haggai 2:4b)

Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he. (Prov. 29:18)

Well, Haggai gave the discouraged people of Judah a vision. A vision of a rebuilt temple and a rebuilt community of faith. Working hard. Fear being overcome by the assurance that the God of all glory was with them.

No, none of us knows for certain what Midway Presbyterian Church will be like five or ten years from now. But we do know that it doesn't take a great cathedral for wonderful things to take place. They can happen in a simple white, wood frame building in rural Western

Kentucky, where Mrs. Inez Ragland taught Sunday School. They can take place in a 189-year-old church at the intersection of Midway and Crestview Roads in Anderson County. When we work together in the light of God's presence, things we cannot even imagine *can* take place. This same God is our host at this table to which we now are invited to come.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.