**Haggai 2:1-8,12** May 22, 2022

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Easter 6 (Stewardship)

*Haggai 1:1-8,12 In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 2This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.’”*

*3Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: 4“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” 5Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 6You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”*

*7This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 8Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord…*

*12Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.*

**Intentions**

When they first moved to their new homes, they had the best of intentions. In fact, they had more than intentions. They had plans. Not only did they have plans, they went out and executed those plans. It was a new life, and they were determined to make it a better life; better in every way.

If you haven’t moved in the last 30 or 40 years, maybe you have forgotten. But if you made your last big move fairly recently, you can relate. By “big move” I don’t mean when you shifted between apartments in the same town, but the last time you moved to a new community for the long term.

Remember how determined you were to get to know your neighbors; to learn all that your new town had to offer; to, on the weekends, see the local sights; to get to know the history of the area. You probably also determined that this time you were going to get things right: to be involved in the community, to do more family things, to get to church more regularly. But now, a few years down the road, you recall those original intentions and wonder what happened. Why haven’t you lived up to what you had intended?

Those are the sort of people Haggai the prophet was speaking to: people who had started with grand plans, but have forgotten the vision, and in the process, have wandered from God’s way.

What happened? Well, when you start reading the second shortest book of the Old Testament, Haggai, the Bible assumes you know the back story. Do you? When Mr. Kiefer did that excellent job of wrestling to the ground those names Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jehozadak, did you have any clue who those men were? If not, don’t feel too guilty, but you have to know.

Big picture here. So this is the Old Testament in very broad strokes, and this much should at leastbe familiar. In about 1800BC, Abraham’s descendants, about 70 in number, moved to Egypt. There they multiplied and were enslaved. After 400 years of that, the Lord delivered them from slavery and moved them to Palestine. 400 years later they got a king. 400 years later—we’re about 600 BC now—their nation was shattered and they were carried off as captives, nearly 1,000 miles, to Babylon. After 70 years in captivity—and now we are getting close to the point at hand with Haggai—after 70 years the Babylonians were replaced lock, stock and barrel, by the Persians. The Persian king, Cyrus, wanting to win the favor of all his newly conquered peoples, started handing out favors. His favor for the captive Israelites, now called Jews, was that if they wanted, they were allowed to return to their homeland. It was as if the early Americans had written the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, and the king of England had said, “Sure! Why not! No need for a Revolutionary War.”

The Jews were ecstatic! No, it wouldn’t be easy. They would have to move to a largely abandoned land. They would be pioneers. They would have to build their own houses with their own hands, unstop the wells, bust the sod, organize the schools and PTA. But what a big and beautiful dream they had. Just like you when you moved to your new community, and you determined that this time you were going to do things right. Family, God, community.

Those Jews of 537BC had the same dream. They came with a plan, a really organized plan. It wasn’t one or two of them, or one or two families, but 49,697 of them. We still have the census data in Nehemiah chapter seven. 50,000 of them moving in at one time, rejoicing in the Lord’s grace because he allowed them to return to the land promised to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Rebuilding the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem was part of the resettlement prime directive. You see, the Jews of 537 BC were a lot more religious than we are. They were only in the land three months, just long enough to claim a plot of ground and put a makeshift roof over their kids’ heads, and they were in Jerusalem doing this: *“Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.”* (Ezra 3:2). You recognize any names there? Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor? Just like from our Haggai reading?

But wait! What did our reading say? In our reading Haggai told this same Zerubbabel and Joshua, ***“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘These people say, “The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.” …Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’”***

They had had such great intentions. They had started so well. Now God’s prophet is rebuking them. What happened?

Remember the intentions you had with your last big move? Maybe you even started well. What happened? Life happened. Some of it was that you just got realistic about how much can get done in seven 24-hour days. Some of what you gave up wasn’t really important, but some of it was. And you got lost. You forgot what was important. You got off track and you never got back on. That’s what happened to the Jews in Jerusalem.

What happened was this: They had started building the new temple and their neighbors stopped by. They asked, “Hey, whatcha building?” “A temple.” “Can we help?” “Well, what God do you worship?” The neighbors said, “Some of us worship Molech, others Baal, and some of us are free spirits who aren’t much for organized religion, but hey, we all worship the same God. So let us help!” And the Jews replied, “Sorry. We don’t all worship the same God. *We* worship the Lord. This is our project.” And the neighbors got mad and wrote some nasty letters about the Jews to the King of Persia a thousand miles away. The king read the nasty letters and believed the lies and told the Jews to stop. Just in case they didn’t get his point, the cease and desist orders arrived with an armed force.

And that was the end of building the temple.

Well, Haggai came along and God said through him, ***“These people say, ‘The time has not come for the Lord’s house to be built.’ …Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while [my] house remains a ruin?”*** But you object, “Well, they were forced to stop. It wasn’t their fault.” But here’s the detail I didn’t tell you. Between when Zerubbabel and company stopped and Haggai showed up, fourteen years had passed. Fourteen years!

The Lord didn’t insist that his people rebuild the temple at the cost of their own lives. That they stopped was not the problem, but times had changed. The danger had passed. In the meanwhile, the Jewish people had moved on. They built their new nation, their cities, their schools, their houses, started their businesses. Past threats of violence had become nothing more than an all-too-convenient excuse not to spend time and money on the temple. You can just hear the rationalizing, “Oh, we can’t rebuild. That would cause a war.” The timid because of their lack of faith would mean it sincerely. The bold would hide their godlessness behind a reasonable sounding excuse. And there would be a great mass of the others for whom it was too easy to do what they wanted do.

Remember how last time you moved, you had all those intentions that never got fulfilled? Well, it happened to the Jews. But their unfulfilled intentions weren’t trivial intentions like getting down to Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace. These Jews had neglected the core of a believer’s life. It was God’s house, half-begun, half standing in ruins. They failed to put God in first place. They were finding excuses to pursue a comfortable life, a decent income, society’s expectations, opportunities for the kids. In truth, it was the servant making excuses to his master, *“I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is wat belongs to you.”*

And it happens to Christians. We start with good intentions, yet we know what happens to those good intentions. People get confirmed; all of you did whether as kids or adults. People promise to be faithful, faithful even unto death. They promise to be part of this congregation, to hear God’s Word and receive the Sacrament regularly, to support this church’s ministry with time and offerings, but the majority just kind of fade away. “Not interesting. Don’t have time. Gotta work. Someone said something to me once. Don’t like the music.”

Of course, it is easiest to point at others, but the Bible rarely tells us to look at others. What it usually tells us is what the Lord said twice through Haggai—and when God repeats himself it means you should be listening—***“Give thought to your ways.”*** It’s not “Whatabouthim?” Examine your life for sin, not other people’s lives for their sin. Where do you see sin at work? Where do you see your past commitments to godliness flagging? Where do you see yourself making excuses to make your life more enjoyable at the expense of leaving God’s house in ruins?

You see, for Christians, it’s supposed to work like the Apostle Paul said in Romans 12, *“In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.”* It starts with God’s mercy, his forgiveness, his adoption through baptism, that’s what makes us God’s people. Then God’s people, by Spirit-given resolve, make the conscious choice of whether they are going to serve God or if they are going to, like some sort of deadbeat, take the money and run, or take God’s grace and run. By God’s grace two of the three servants in the Gospel parable made the choice to serve their generous master with their talents. Paul, in Romans twelve had every hope that his hearers would be transformed from the pattern of this world, to God’s ways.

That’s the other two readings. So what happened when Haggai confronted the governor and the high priest? Oh, we know how it went with the Israelites. How often they complained! How often they refused to listen to the prophets! Jesus himself described Israel’s usual response to God’s messengers, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent you…”* (Mt 23:37). We have a pretty good guess how Haggai’s mission turned out.

Except, here’s what happened: ***“Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.”***

They gave thought to their ways. They realized all of God’s goodness. Fifteen years before they had been virtual slaves along the Euphrates River, and now they had a thriving society in the land promised to Abraham. They repented! They called their sin sin, and they changed their ways.

Then they went up into the mountains, they brought down the timbers and they built the Lord’s house. And the Lord Almighty took pleasure in it and was honored.

May it be so with you. Remember God’s grace and goodness; remember the best of your intentions to honor God, and live out those intentions. Amen.