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Take Courage and Work Haggai 1:7-15; 2:1-9

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In the year 520 B.C., the Lord sends the prophet Haggai to bring inspiration and motivation to the people of God who are living in difficult times economically, politically, socially, and spiritually. Judah had been an independent nation with its own king and defined borders, a decent agricultural based economy, all centered spiritually around worshipping the Lord at the magnificent temple built by King Solomon. Now they are a conquered, defeated people, a small province at the western outskirts of the vast Persian Empire, terrible drought has devastated the crops and limited the supply of food, all that remains of the once magnificent temple is a burned out shell of a building and a small half-hearted attempt at replacing it that was still not completed 16 years after work on it had begun. The relationship between the people returning from exile in Babylon and those who had remained in Judah working the land was often contentious and divisive as disputes arose over land ownership as people tried to eke out a living.

To this politically impotent, economically depressed, socially divided, spiritually fearful and dispirited group of people, the Lord sends the prophet Haggai.

“In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai (Hag ay-i), saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel (Zuhr-ruhb-uh-bl) son of Shealtiel (shee-al tee-el), governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak (je-hahz uh-dak), the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say,

Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?

How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

Yet now **take courage**, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; **take courage**, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; **take courage**, all you people of the land, says the Lord; **work, for I am with you**, says the Lord of hosts, according to **the promise** that I made you when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, *I will* shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and *I will* shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and *I will fill* this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place *I will give* prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”

The Lord has several things to say through the prophet Haggai. As I read and studied this book during the week, one phrase kept coming into my head: **things get worse until you put God first**. In chapter one, the Lord asks the people to consider how they are doing, how life is going, while God is pushed aside rather than put first in their lives (Haggai 1:5-6, 10-11). The answer is **lousy**. Much like the book of Deuteronomy, Haggai ties obedience with prosperity and disobedience with difficulty. There is a certain degree to which that is the case. Please understand, I am not saying that if we put God first that all of life will be sweetness and light and financial wealth, nothing bad will ever happen to us or anyone we care about and we'll never get sick or have adversity. Some of the most faithful people who ever lived – have endured poverty, physically debilitating conditions, and even persecution - like John the Baptist, Jesus, and Stephen – who were all killed because of their faithful obedience. However, when we don't put God first, life often goes from bad to worse. **Things get worse until you put God first**. This was certainly the experience of the people of Haggai's day. When we look at our own culture and the selfishness, materialism, violence, perversion, voyeurism, abuse, and hypocrisy the same can probably be said about us. The Lord says that **things are bad because the people have neglected God's presence and place in their lives and their community**.

The prophet's message in response to this down and out situation was unusual for a prophet - **rebuild the temple and give witness to God's presence and power, even and especially in difficult times**. In the Bible, the prophets are almost universally down on the temple – including Nathan (2 Samuel 7:4-7), Isaiah (1:10-17 esp. 14), and Jeremiah (7:1-15, esp. 11). They're down on it for a variety of reasons. Through the prophet Nathan the Lord reminded King David how early in Israel's history under the leadership of Moses, they were a people on the move, following wherever God led. Isaiah and other prophets express the Lord's disgust toward sacrificing multitudes of animals, and having solemn rituals and assemblies without people seeking to do justice, ceasing to do evil, and helping those in need. Folks got wrapped up in the magnificent temple built by King Solomon and **missed what God wanted them to do in the world**. In Haggai's time, that fabulous and opulent temple was nothing but a burned-out wreck. Changing circumstances sometimes require changes in thinking.

The Lord knows and conveys through the prophet, that as long as the temple is neglected, as long as the Lord remains low on the people's priority lists instead of

helping them order their lists, there are going to be major problems. God yearns to enter into deeper relationship with people and having the major project of rebuilding the temple will also serve to unite the people while restoring their spirits and giving them hope for the future.

Whenever work goes forward anywhere that always leads to new challenges. In this case, it was some people having the wrong attitude, mourning what they had lost, waxing nostalgic about the good old days and Solomon's temple rather than continuing to praise God for what they had and for what remained. Some of the older generation recognized that the new building did not compare well at all with the one built by Solomon. The second temple was as nothing in the sight of the older generation (Ezra 3:10-13). It may be true that the older we get the more difficult it becomes to look forward with hope as our body ages and more of our life lies behind us than ahead of us. The criticism of these people could have been contagious, potentially infecting and hindering the perceptions and activity of those who had not seen the earlier temple.

Regardless of our age it is often easier to complain than to compliment, to criticize than to constructively assist, to tear down than to build up. Often we complain against those who are working the hardest and doing the most for us, whether in our families, at work, school, or church. It is easier to complain than it is to propose answers or to be part of a solution. I was signing Nathan up for Babe Ruth baseball this past week and I laughed out loud when I read the following on the page for parents: "How as a parent do I get involved? Are you kidding??? If you make eye contact with any member of the board we consider you "in." If you have any complaints as to the way we run our program, you are considered a member of the board! (we take prisoners)." Our attitude and approach to problems makes a tremendous difference.

**God chooses what we go through. We choose how we will go through it. We choose our attitude and the Lord says through the prophet -
Dedication to the task is more important than nostalgia for the past.**

Jesus says in Luke 9:62, "*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" Haggai was trying to help God's people move into a future but some folks were critical, fearful, or skeptical and thus unable to help make God's future a reality. That's a problem

The solution, God says, is to *Take Courage*. Courage is needed because it is so easy to be negative, to have no faith or lose our faith, to be scared in the face of an overwhelming challenge. God knows the political and religious leaders need courage

and so does the remnant of the people so the prophet tells each to **Take Courage**. We can be paralyzed by fear. We can suffer paralysis by analysis and do nothing. God says, **“Work for I am with you.”**

“My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” God’s Spirit stands in our midst.

When the Lord says, Take Courage and Work, God is speaking concerning our Attitude and our Effort. Through our relationship with the Lord and trusting in God’s promises we are to cultivate an attitude of courage and faith, of believing in things that cannot yet be seen, believing that nothing shall be impossible with God.

People of faith and vision need the right attitude but we also need to make an effort, we are to Work. If we have a bad attitude, if we’re critical, negative, unbelieving, or if we are not willing to work and invest our time, energy, resources and ideas, then we need to ask ourselves, whether we are impacting our family, our church, our work environment, our school, our neighborhood, our country in the manner and direction God desires. Are we encouragers or discouragers?

Courage and work, attitude and effort this is the sweat equity we contribute to God’s work whether it is rebuilding a temple 500 years before the birth of Jesus or building our families and friendships, our church and community in the 21st century.

When the people of God work together we bring about something greater than the sum of our parts spiritual power is unleashed. The Lord of hosts promises to do the rest. Last night we showed the Veggie Tale premier of Mo and The Big Exit, a Veggie Tales telling of the Exodus story. In it Mo and Aaron say their job is to stick to God’s plan and God will do the rest. That’s the deal.

The Lord says, “I am with you, my spirit abides among you, do not fear.” The Lord promises, *“I will shake, I will shake, I will fill, and I will give.”* God provides the resources for what the Lord wants people to do.

God still wants to be in relationship with people and one thing the Lord wants right now is **externally focused churches that are rebuilding their communities**. The challenge in our time is not so much rebuilding a physical temple as it is rebuilding hope, helping those in need, sharing the good news of God’s love in Christ in practical ways that even those who may not share our faith convictions cannot ignore. Churches that welcome people and groups into their facilities while releasing their people and resources to engage their communities have a rippling impact throughout the area in which they serve. The renovation we are doing at the Lower Cape Outreach Council is a

great example of this fact. It is simply an act of generous grace which we can do in response to the generous grace God has shown us.

Someone asked me how the church decides what projects to do. When we look at all things we could do, I think it is helpful to look for things that can answer certain questions.

Will this ministry enable us to share God's love and the gospel with those in need? Does the community need this ministry? Is this ministry consistent with the mission, vision, and values of BBC? Do we have the volunteer leaders capable of developing and doing this ministry? Is there opportunity for interaction between volunteers and people in need of help, hope, and the good news of God's love in Jesus?

I am very excited about the project right here in Brewster in which we will partner with **Habitat for Humanity of Cape Cod**. Habitat believes that *"everyone deserves a simple, decent, affordable place to live"* and their *"programs are founded on Christian faith in action."* We all know that Affordable Housing continues to be one of the most serious issues facing Cape Codders and a prime reason why people are moving away from the Cape and our church. Habitat for Humanity of Cape Cod has been working for almost 20 years to help provide safe, affordable, and permanent housing for Cape Cod families.

After several years of work, Habitat is going to be building several new homes right here in Brewster. A Habitat build is a community effort that takes love, teamwork, finances, and many willing hands and hearts. The first volunteers for each home are the homeowners but each home needs a sponsor. Habitat for Humanity of Cape Cod also has a relationship with their affiliate in Haiti. The cost of sponsoring a home is \$50,000 and for \$5,000 a home can be built in Haiti so \$55,000 will provide two families – one in Brewster and one in Haiti with a new home of their own. If you are interested in applying for the lottery for one of the homes there will be a meeting for any interested parties on Tuesday evening at 6:30 p.m. at the Brewster Ladies Library.

BBC is taking on the challenge and the opportunity to sponsor one of the Habitat Homes in our town – it is a biblical, generous, fun thing we can do that will also be a great outreach and message to our community. We will need everyone's help in raising the money, providing volunteers to do the work two days a week (typically Tuesday and Saturday), to lead devotions in the morning, to help in providing lunch. We have plenty of time to prepare as groundbreaking will hopefully be in September for the homes which will be three-bedroom Capes that will be located off Slough Road in West

Brewster. Like the folks in Haggai's time who were challenged to give the resources and the effort to finish building the temple and I am confident that God has given us the resources, the people, the ability, and the time to successfully sponsor a home if we will take courage and work.

For Christians, the temple of God is no longer a building but a spiritual house, the church, *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and **grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God.**"*

(Ephesians 2:20-22).

We are all called to the faithful building up of the temple that is the body of Christ. Our task at the present is not to construct a temple to build a community around like Haggai needed to do. **Our task is to take the spiritual house which is the church into the community in every way that we can.**

What a great witness it is when we can say, **"The church has left the building."**

So remember, things get worse when we don't put God first, but when we take Courage and work, we can help fulfill God's purpose in our time. Those who follow Jesus believe God's Son lived and died and rose for us, that God is still with us even and especially in difficult times. We believe God's Spirit abides among us, and and this same God promises to provide all that we need for the Lord's future to be accomplished in and through us if we will take courage and work.

Blessing: **"Take courage, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, My spirit abides among you; do not fear. "**

Let me mention two more opportunities to witness to the presence of God in our community. The Brewster in Bloom Parade is April 29 and the theme is "Sailing into Spring," it would be great if our church could have a visible presence in the parade, would anyone be interested in having fun with that? Another area is the church Holiday Fair in November. Each year BBC has generated \$15,000 or more for ministry through the fair and this year it would be great to have it and use the proceeds for the Habitat project and the parsonage renovations, however, we need a few energetic people who can help manage it. I'd love to talk to anybody who would get excited about that.

Bulletin Content: Background on Haggai

The final three books of the Old Testament - Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi speak to the struggling community of Jews in the region of Judah after the return from exile in Babylon.

Haggai was first on the scene. Like Amos, Habakkuk, and Obadiah before him, Haggai is not provided with a family background as a result, we know little more than the prophet's name. In 520 B.C. Judah no longer existed as a national entity. Its territory was a tiny sub-province of the Persian Empire. The population no longer made up a nation but a religious community centered around Jerusalem. Economically, times were hard, daily existence was a matter of staying alive in the face of hunger and devastation caused by drought and crop failures, inflation, and hostility from neighbors. Interactions were often strained between those who had remained in Judah working the land and those who were newly returned from Babylon. Sixteen years after the process of rebuilding the temple was begun, the people had yet to finish because they have made taking care of themselves a priority over taking care of God's work. The prophet Haggai comes to call the people to the task of putting God back at the center of their life and of working together in unity to accomplish the Lord's task.