

Series: The Minor Prophets**Today: Haggai—Zeal for the “House” of the Lord****Text: Haggai 1:-1-9****A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.****Sunday, August 17, 2008****First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

If you have been away for the last few weeks, we are in the midst of a series of sermons which has focused our attention on little known books of the Bible: the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. As a recap of what we have learned, there are two things I hope you will remember: first, the Minor Prophets are not less important than the Major Prophets. They are just shorter than the messages of what we call the Major Prophets. Second, the function of a prophet is not to predict the future. The definition of a prophet is one who speaks for God. Minor Prophets were people who packed a powerful message into just a few chapters of the Bible to remind their peers that God is concerned about the specific issues of the times in which they lived just as we believe God still speaks to the circumstances of our lives in present day.

Today we turn to the prophecy of Haggai. It is two only chapters long, and other than those two chapters, we know nothing about the author of this book. In fact, we aren't sure if he is the author, or if this is merely a compilation of the sermons which he might have preached to the governor of Judah (Zerubbabel). His message was a simple one: *rebuild the Temple*. Rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. The sermons are dated around the second year of the rule of Darius I (about 520 B.C.), so we assume he was an old man who had lived through the destruction of the Temple and had lived nearly 70 years waiting for it to be rebuilt. Some

of you will remember that when we restored this Sanctuary in 2003, we used the words of Haggai in verse 8 as our theme: *To Honor and Please God*.

If we ask ourselves why the rebuilding of the Temple was so important to Haggai, we may be able to find the significance of his words for the 21st century. Let me suggest three reasons why Haggai spoke to his time, and why those reasons are still valid for our time. First, let's look at what the Temple represents to Haggai. Second, let's look at why he was so angry that it had not been rebuilt. Finally, let's look at the promise of God when the people do their part.

What the Temple Represents

In the days of the prophet, the Temple was the place where the presence of God was affirmed. It was the place where Tabernacle had found a permanent home. It contained the scrolls of Law, the first five books of the Bible which had been given to Moses when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. It was the place where people came to remember the covenant which God made to be faithful to them and where they came to be reminded of their responsibility to be faithful to God.

The Temple was the place where High Priest offered sacrifices on behalf of the people, and as the smoke of those sacrifices rose heavenward, prayers were offered with the firm belief that God would hear those prayers and remember His people. It has always represented the seat of the Holy in the life of Israel. To allow the Temple to lie in ruins was to deny their belief that God was more powerful than the worst that could happen to them. It represented their loss of faith in the transcendent power of God, and without that faith, life had become focused on the temporal.

There are buildings in our lives which mean so much more than a mere structure, aren't there? Cherie and I have just moved to the city after twelve years of living in a beautiful development just outside the city in Lancaster Township. The hardest part of that move was giving up the house which had been a place where so much of our life had been centered. It was the only home that our granddaughter, Emma, had ever known. It was a place where we celebrated our life together as a family; holidays, birthdays, and other significant family events. The house we lived in was more than just the building. It represented something more to us; something precious in the life of our family, and it was with some reluctance that we turned it over to strangers who do not share the memories of family which we had built there.

Church buildings can have the same kind of impact in our lives. On Friday we did the Memorial Service for Glen Dalrymple, and I had a similar experience with his adult children that I have every time we do a memorial service here for a long-term member of this church. I am always impressed by the memories that the adult children have of growing up in this place. They remember their Sunday School experience; their first communion; their own weddings; and perhaps even the baptism of their own children before they moved somewhere far away where the same memories do not exist. They remember that this was a place where they discovered that there was something greater than themselves which continues to sustain them as they grieve the loss of one of the most important people in their lives.

The Temple represented the transcendent power of God in the lives of the believers, and Haggai was furious that it had laid in ruins for nearly 70 years without the people restoring it to its former glory.

On our last day in Kenya we visited the Kibera Slum just outside Nairobi. It is one of the poorest sections of Nairobi, and therefore one of the places where the poorest of the poor in Kenya live. It was one of the places where the violence which followed the December elections was very prominent. Our driver was very nervous taking us there because he knew the poverty we would see and the dangers inherent in being easily identified as Americans with money in such a poverty-stricken community.

We met with the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Kibera, and he gave us a tour of the buildings which had been looted first and then burned by the rioters. There was the sanctuary, a nursery school which served over 400 children, and the pastor's house. All of them had been severely damaged, yet just seven months later work was well under way to rebuild. The Sanctuary was rededicated just a few weeks before our visit. The nursery school was about a third complete, and money was being sought to restore the house as an office building for the parish.

I asked Pastor Samuel if he felt the danger was over. He told me he was not sure; that the people who had destroyed the buildings had never been prosecuted, and he was not sure what they would do when the new structures were in place. So I asked him why he chose to rebuild when things were so uncertain, and he told us, *"To allow these buildings to lay in ruins is to say to the people that evil has had the final word, and I believe that the final word belongs to God. So we rebuild and say to the people that God has not finished His work here in Kibera."*

"Rebuild the Temple!" This is the message of Haggai, because the Temple represents more than a building. It represents the faith of a people in the transcendent power of God.

Why was Haggai so angry?

Haggai was angry with his peers for their failure to rebuild the Temple. It was a righteous anger at what he felt was the misplaced priorities of the people of Israel. People were taking care of their own needs and failing to give God first place in their lives. They attended to their own homes and let the House of God lie in ruins. *4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" 5 Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 6 You 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."*

Rebuilding the Temple was about more than a building. It was about the priorities of the people. They had placed themselves, their needs, and their desires above their faithfulness to the transcendent power of God in their lives.

Like most of you, I have been caught up in the Olympic Games this past week. I am not sure why we get so involved, but my guess is that it isn't just about the achievements of the athletes, as wonderful as they are. It touches a part of us which wants to believe that the individual performance is about a larger whole. For a few weeks we root for our young people who are representing their country. They are doing their best for their nations, and their desire to do well for their country fuels all the training they have done to push themselves beyond their limits in order to achieve a higher goal. Can you imagine what these games would be if it was only about individual achievement? We are grateful that young people are able to strive for a higher good, a greater goal, if only for a few weeks.

One critical thinker of our time has asked this question: *Who, then, are we, we prideful twenty-first century creatures? Lord knows, we no longer think of ourselves as belonging to anyone or anything. We do not belong- we own; we possess. And that, to say the least, is not the same thing. We plunge into self-aggrandizement convinced that the dazzling success of our projects will prove definitely who we are. But this fails to satisfy. Our triumphs ring hollow. Our victories so often turn to ashes in our mouths. But never mind. Tomorrow we will run faster, climb higher, and one fine morning... Who are we? We are creatures who have forgotten what it means to be faithful to something other than ourselves.* (source: Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Who Are We? Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities* (Eerdmans, 2000))

Haggai was angry because he believed people had misplaced their priorities. They had become self-absorbed. Rebuilding the Temple wasn't just about a building. It was about what they valued and how they lived out those values in their lives. It was about giving God the place that God is due for each of us.

The Promise of God When We Do Our Part

The final message of Haggai is a word of assurance. If the people will do their part, God will be faithful to His promise. All they have to do is begin. They don't have to worry about whether they will be able to complete the Temple. They just have to begin to rebuild the Temple, and God speaks—I am with you. Just pick up a stone and begin to lay the foundation, and the promise of God comes—I am with you.

This is the final lesson of Haggai. When we are willing to demonstrate the slightest bit of faith, God is willing to meet us more than half way and help us to accomplish what God intends for our lives.

On April 26, 2008, the Western Oregon women's softball team played against Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. During the course of the game, Western Oregon senior Sara Tucholsky hit the first home run of her college career. She dropped her bat and started to make her way around the bases. In the midst of all the excitement, she forgot to tag first base. When the first base coach brought the mistake to her attention, she quickly turned around. To everyone's horror, her right knee buckled.

Crying, she tried her best to crawl back to the base. Tucholsky's teammates were warned that if they touched her, she would be called out. The umpires also noted that if her coaches opted to call in a pinch runner, the home run would only count as a single.

You can probably imagine the shock everyone felt, then, when Mallory Holtman, the opposing team's first baseman and career homerun leader for Central Washington, turned to the umpire and said, "Would it be okay if we carried her around the bases, and she touched each bag?"

There was no rule about this in the rule book. Who would have thought that one needed to be written? No one could anticipate that a competitor would want to help his/her opponent to win the game. So when the umpires gave their approval, Holtman and teammate Liz Wallace picked up Tucholsky, crossed their hands beneath her, and carried her to second base. Once there, they lowered the injured player and gently touched her foot to the bag. They did the same for third base and home plate. The crowd erupted into a standing ovation. Western Oregon went on to win the game, eliminating Central Washington from the playoffs.

When later asked about the good deed, Holtman said the decision to help out her opponent was simple. She felt Tucholsky deserved the home run, because the ball cleared

the fence. *"She did her part. The least we could do was to help her."* [source: George Vecsey, "A Sporting Gesture Touches 'Em All," The New York Times (4-30-08)]

This is what Haggai promises the people of Israel. If they do their part, God will help them achieve their goals. The choice is there for us all.

Conclusion

Rebuild the Temple. This is the message of the prophet. However, it isn't just about a building. It is about what that building represents: the transcendent power of God. It is about focusing on the right priorities, and it is about discovering that if they are willing to do their part, God is willing to be with them to help them. In the end that is all any of us want to know or need to know; that God is with us. It is also the thing we too often forget that there is more to the world than we can see, touch, taste or smell; or when we think that our needs, wants and desires are the only thing that matter.