

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Gary Gumuchian, Guest Preacher

November 10, 2019

Twenty-Second Sunday
after Pentecost

Haggai 2:1-9

CHAZAQ

I'm presenting today's scripture lesson a little differently than my usual. There is a huge set up to this prophecy of Haggai. To come in cold at this point would be like starting on page 250 of 300-page novel. Rather than read the scripture and deliver the sermon, I'm starting with a bit of a history and literary context, then I'll read from Haggai, then I'll preach a shorter message than my usual...

A few weeks ago, I preached about Jeremiah purchasing land in the face of an approaching conquering Babylonian army. That army besieged, captured, and sacked Jerusalem in 586 BC. The temple was raised to the ground. The Babylonians carried off a portion of the surviving Jewish population. They took the educated, the skilled craftsmen, the priests, the builders, the scribes, anyone with skills and status to add to the wealth of Babylon. And everyone capable of stirring up trouble when the army left. Some commoners were left behind to tend the farmland, but the city itself was a desolate ruin.

Empires rise and Empires fall.

In 539, Cyrus the Great, who first unified Persia, conquered the Babylonian Empire and established the Persian Empire in its place.

In 538, Cyrus was still subduing pockets of resistance. One of those pockets of resistance was Egypt. It's always Egypt being troublesome to these ancient Mesopotamian superpowers. Whether distance or wealth, Egypt always had the chutzpah to defy the powers of Western Asia. Jerusalem made strategic sense as supply depot should the armies of Babylon need to march on Egypt. Cyrus decided to re-establish Jerusalem as a province of the Persian Empire.

He sent a portion of the Jewish people, those the Babylonians dragged into exile, back to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus gave local authority to Zerubbabel as governor and Joshua as Priest. It is noteworthy that Zerubbabel was both a descendant of King David and an earthly ancestor of Jesus Christ.

The job of rebuilding had begun, but no sooner than the foundation had been laid, other groups in the area began to make trouble for our group of returnees. Enemies and rivals of the Jews wanted to be part of the rebuilding. On the face of it, one might ask who cares? More funding and workers? Sure!

Except, these folks were not worshipers of God. Rather, they may have sought to build a temple like the Roman Pantheon a Temple for multiple Gods. They may have had a syncretistic understanding, that is to say, they may have said, "your God, YHWH is the same God as our God, but with a different name. So don't mind us as we worship in the name of our god, Moloch, Chemosh, Ba'al..." The Bible tells us that the Jews had gone down that road before with Baal, the Queen of Heaven and other false gods. The Jewish people were not going to make that mistake again.

When these local rivals were rebuffed, they falsely claimed to the Persian government that the Jews were in a state of rebellion. They bribed, lied, and otherwise conducted a campaign of false information to

disrupt the restoration of the city and temple. Rather than risk Persian wrath, the returnees ceased their work, leaving only the foundation of the Temple complete. No walls for the city, no temple, no real restoration of their cultural and spiritual identity.

About 15 years had passed when Haggai was called by God. The entirety of Haggai's prophetic utterances occur over about four months. Haggai was called to pronounce that the time to rebuild was now. Haggai was called to that place, at that time, to proclaim these messages. This Book of Haggai has two chapters totaling 38 verses. His first prophecy was announced almost two months prior to his second, which I will read in a moment.

Before I read it, I want to provide some context. The scripture gives us a precise date: 21st Day of the seventh month in the second year of the reign of King Darius. Brighter folks than I have calculated this date to be October 17th 520 BC. This matters, because, as folks brighter than I have calculated, this to be the last day of the Festival of Booths, or the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The Feast of the Tabernacles is a celebration of the harvest. It is also an opportunity to praise God. It is used to remember the time in the Wilderness, the time between leaving Egypt and prior to entering the Promise Land. The time in the wilderness was also the time when the people first received the Law of God at Mount Sinai, and the earth shook. During the festival the Book of Deuteronomy, a book of the Law was read in its entirety to the people.

In Deuteronomy 31, one of the last chapters, Moses uses the word CHAZAQ three times in his charge to Joshua and the people. CHAZAQ is a word that gets translated in a multitude of ways; it doesn't directly translate into English with all its connotations. It means: "take Courage" "Be Strong" "take Heart".

Additionally, King Solomon had centuries earlier dedicated the first temple on the last day of this festival, the festival booths.

There is a lot of meaning behind every word God supplies to Haggai. There is a lot of meaning in God's choice to present these words on that day.

Haggai reminds the people of their history and relationship with God.

When I read, you'll notice that in nine verses the phrase LORD of Hosts is used five times. LORD of Hosts has a specific meaning. When I say, or you read LORD of HOSTS, I want you to imagine the sky full of Angels armed for battle lined up in ranks and columns ready to descend upon the enemies of God and enemies of God's people.

It has been two months since Haggai first prophesied regarding the rebuilding of the Temple. It took the Jewish people a few weeks to get started on this great undertaking. The work has just started, and the people of Jerusalem are looking at the previous foundations, and accumulation of building materials. They are wondering. Can we do it? How will we do it? Will we get in trouble for doing this? Can we afford to do this?

Leadership and commoners probably had conflicting emotions about the undertaking, particularly if they recalled the nonsense 15 years prior. It had to be intimidating. It had to be worrisome. There had to be those who were downright scared about the possible effects of this project on their community, their friends, and their families.

So with that as in introduction. I want you to imagine being in that crowd. It is approaching the end of the Festival of Booths. During the festival, you have praised God, celebrated the granting of the Law to you and your people, you have recalled times when God has saved your ancestors, you have a renewed sense connection with God. Despite that, you are looking at the foundations of a Temple you can barely imagine seeing completed. Perhaps you are a little discouraged that so little seems to have been accomplished since returning home 18 years ago.

And Haggai moves to a place of prominence and begins to speak....

People of God, Give listen to this story of God and the People of God

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

2:1 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, saying:

2:2 Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say,

2:3 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?

2:4 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,

2:5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

2:6 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;

2:7 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.

2:8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts.

2:9 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 Word of God for the People of God, Thanks be to God

CHAZAQ, take courage

CHAZAQ Zerubbabel,

CHAZAQ Joshua, son of Jehozadak

CHAZAQ all you people of the land

On that day in 520 BC, Haggai speaking for God, re-presenting God to a people without a Temple, brilliantly acknowledged the discouragement the people Jerusalem were feeling and then bolstered their spirits and encouraged them to see this rebuilding process through to the end.

God says through his prophet, Chazaq, take courage, for I am with you,

God says through Haggai, CHAZAQ, take courage and Build the temple. Do not worry about your enemies. Take courage for I am the Lord of the armies of heaven.

CHAZAQ, take courage and Build the temple for I am the Lord who made the world and created all its wealth are with you.

CHAZAQ, take courage and Build the temple for I am the Lord who will once again shake the world.

CHAZAQ, take courage for I am the Lord who brought your ancestors out of Egypt. I have been with you always and will always be with you.

CHAZAQ, take courage you are my people and I am your God.

Build the Temple because it will be amazing. We will do this together. You will build and I will continue to bless and grace you with what you need to see this through.

And in the end, there will be prosperity, or more accurately as the actual Hebrew word is Shalom, CHAZAQ, take courage and there will be peace.

Have courage and there will be peace. Fear not, for God is with you. What a message.

And they did build the temple, a temple later expanded by Herod the Great, but that foundation in 520 was the same foundation of the same Temple in which Jesus Christ taught and healed. Peter, John, and the other apostles would preach and teach in it. And God shook the earth....

Why of all the lectionary readings available this morning did I choose to go with Haggai? Why would I select a reading from, let us be honest, an obscure prophet?

Right, there's a construction project to be undertaken,

Construction projects have expectations and hopes. They have an inevitable honeymoon period when everything is exciting and going well. And then...

I don't want to be gloomy, but there is a reality, when it comes to church construction projects, I have a little experience. I worked through one in Littleton, which lasted much longer than we ever expected. There were times of stress. There were moments of discouragement. Things did not go exactly according to plan.

I do not want to alarm you or scare you, but there can be issues in old buildings like early 19th century churches. Open up a wall, and you start finding problems. That's what contingencies are for, but it still was a bit of a bummer. In Littleton, there were delays, problems with the contractor, problems with the architect, problems with town by-laws, problems bringing the building up to code, regulations, inspections. In short, there were lots of bumps in the road and reasons to turn sour.

Despite the project taking longer, costing more, and being far more disruptive than originally expected, I would go through all the highs and lows of working through a construction project again. The difference in the lower level, parish hall, kitchen and parking lot is still remarkable to those who were attending prior to the project. It was worth every bit of angst and aggravation.

While I pray for Union Congregational Church to have a smooth and easy experience with the Accessibility Project, I expect you may have some moments here at UCC.

So, remember this lesson from Haggai. This lesson about a people who had much less than we have now. With faith and trust in God, they built a temple that covered acres of land. It can be done.

So...

If the money seems to be running tight, CHAZAQ

If an unexpected expense occurs, CHAZAQ

If there are delays in getting the project started, CHAZAQ

If regulatory bodies like planning boards, zoning boards, building inspectors, fire inspectors, historical committees, conservation committees, and other assorted busy bodies create obstacles to the renovation project, CHAZAQ

If the church looks like a mess, CHAZAQ

If the project is stalled or looks stalled, CHAZAQ

If there is some squabbling about the details, because the color of the walls or carpet has never been a source of conflict in a church...., CHAZAQ

No matter what happens during the accessibility construction project, CHAZAQ

CHAZAQ, CHAZAQ, CHAZAQ

For God, your God, is the Lord of Hosts

Fear not, for God is with you. God's spirit abides with you.