

Sunday April 19, 2020
Lesson 8: Rebuilding the Temple
Scripture: Haggai 2: 1-9

Context:

We jump back to the Old Testament as we continue the section on salvation. The lesson comes from the book of Haggai, one of the lesser known books of the Old Testament. Haggai is one of the twelve minor prophets and is one of the shortest books of the set.

The setting of Haggai is during the early restoration of the land after the exile. Babylon had been taken by Cyrus the Great and the Jews are allowed to return to their homeland where Judea is divided and Jerusalem remains in shambles.¹ As those who have been exiled return, they began to realize rebuilding will take decades and perhaps even a century to restore the city of Jerusalem.

There are several individuals who will be responsible for helping the city and country rebuild. The book of Ezra mentions the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, both of whom will support reconstruction of the Temple under the governor Zerubbabel and the religious priest Jeshua (who is called Joshua in some translations.)² Haggai will communicate with them about the words of the Lord and will help them discern what to do next. There is no biographical information about the prophet.

Like all prophets, Haggai is not afraid to engage in conflict and give counsel to leadership. Dated around 520 BCE, the book consists of four oracles given to Haggai from the Lord.³ The book opens with a critique of the Temple not being rebuilt even though the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua have very nice homes.⁴ As a result, the community has not fared well with a drought sent from Yahweh.

The focus now is to be on the rebuilding of the Temple. Even though the people are afraid of what may happen in rebuilding the Temple a second time while being occupied, they are still to go forward. They are not to be afraid as God will help them in this endeavor even though it may be long and laborious. God will be with them as they restore the Temple, and the resources shall be found to help them in this endeavor. The Lord will provide what they need to do the job.

Application:

Have you ever noticed how many times the bible says: “Do not be afraid?” It seems to be on repeat. Whether it is in one of the Gospel accounts that we know well and deeply cherish, or a saying in some obscure prophetic book in the Old Testament,

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 415.

² Ibid., 417.

³ Ibid., 419.

⁴ Ibid., 419.

the message is one God wants to get across loud and clear. “Do not be afraid,” could be attributed as one of God’s favorite things to say.

Perhaps God needs to repeat it so often because we need to hear it. Fear is a perfectly natural response to things in our lives. We are all afraid of something. Even the bully on the playground secretly fears someone will beat them up or finally let them have it. That is why they bully, to protect themselves because they don’t even like themselves. Fear is a strong motivator in many cases in life.

I think a healthy dosage of fear can be a good thing. When we are fearful of something like a pandemic, we take the proper steps to do what needs to be done to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and the community at large. When we are afraid of repercussions for misbehavior, we learn the importance of boundaries and being responsible. When we fear things which can harm us or the systems and communities where we live, we can be proactive about how to respond to things around us.

Yet perhaps the danger of fear is that it can slip from caution into paralysis or even reactive behavior. When leaders are afraid of things which could happen, they sometimes do things which hurt multiple parties. I have watched as anxiety guides some leaders and all parties eventually suffer from fear being the key ingredient to making decisions.

In the text today, we hear the Lord use the prophet Haggai to encourage the leaders to do what needs to be done and to remember the story of their ancestors to guide them in what is to come. Just as the Spirit of the Lord was with the people in the Exodus and with them when they went into exile, the Spirit of the Lord will fill them as they move the people in a new direction. They are not to be afraid of the challenges and conflicts that are to come. Instead, they are called to not fear and watch the Lord reunite the kingdom.

As part of our lesson connecting to salvation, we are reminded of how salvation has its roots in in the meaning to “be made whole.” Salvation restores us to the place where we need to be. God has saved us and done the repair work which needs to be done. God wants to affirm and makes us whole, even as broken as we may be.

Likewise, God will bring new life out of ruin. There are no guarantees though of things being simple and easy. Haggai, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua had challenges as they rebuilt the Temple and led the country to be healed and restored. There are probably unwritten accounts of the times they faced which include the frustrations of rebuilding while being occupied and perhaps even pushback from different parties within their own country.

Yet the message is clear. The leaders are not to fear what is to come. They will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord to do what needs to be done. They are to remember their ancestors and all the struggles they faced in coming home to the Promised Land. The Lord will give them the resources they need in order to restore the Temple and the county. They will once again be great and mighty just as the Lord intends for them to be. However, it will take time and it will involve blood, sweat, and tears. Yet none of those things means they should be afraid of God abandoning or forsaking them.

Why do you think fear can be a good thing in some ways? Why do you think fear though can also become a stumbling block? What happens when leaders make decisions not out of caution, but out of fear? How can you hold the tension of fear with the spiritual discipline of joy? What practices do you use to connect with God when you are

afraid? Who are the ancestors of your Christian faith who give you strength when you feel depleted or alone? What situations make you afraid currently and how do you respond to them proactively? The next time you do your personal devotional time, look to see if you read the words: “Do not be afraid.” Compare them to this passage in Haggai and think about how God is speaking to your life in the midst of fear.

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