

This morning we're going to look at a chapter from one of the minor prophets, Haggai. I love the prophets because the prophets talked about life with creativity, imagery, and passion. And we can learn about living in the way of God in new ways. Haggai spoke at a time when people were stalled. Life wasn't working for them. But to change what they would experience in the future required that they make a change in the present. Haggai's task was to awaken people to that new change.

We understand the need for change in the present that leads to a different future. We see it in ordinary things in life. Maybe there are habits in your life that you want to change. For me, when I travel, I tend to read a lot. But it seems like my reading drops off when I'm in my regular routine at home. The only way to increase my reading is to change my regular routine. Or maybe you see the need for change in your relationships. In my relationship with Hilary, we can both get tunnel vision with tasks or work. As the days go by, we become snippy and short with each other. What's the solution? It starts with making a change in our task-orientated attention.

We also see the need for change in more profound things, not just ordinary things. Maybe there are people in your life who are making decisions that harm them or others. You are seeking ways to support them and love them. But you also know that change is only going to happen when they make new decisions. Sometimes it's easier to see that in other people's stories than our own.

Or maybe you can see the need for change in your own life. Perhaps you're living in ways outside of God's design, and you know that you need to make a change. Whether ordinary or more profound things, we need to change something in the present so that our future will be different. For Haggai, his audience was stalled and needed to make a change. They had been stalled for 15 years. Haggai declares the way forward for them is to make a new choice in the present. Their past choices had gotten them there, but to experience something different, they needed to make a new choice. Rebuilding requires reorder.

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.'" Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" vv. 2-4

A bit of context for the situation into which Haggai is speaking. A little more than 70 years before Haggai, Babylon came from the East, conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and carried the people off into exile. Now the first contingent of exiles had returned to Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding process of both the city and the temple. What's important to understand is that when they lost the land and the temple, it wasn't merely a loss of property or a building. This was a loss of identity. This was a loss of purpose and mission.

The loss of their land and temple brought into question how they related to God. So, when they started to rebuild, it was a significant moment of rekindling and reengaging their relationship with God. But as they started the rebuilding process, they quickly began to face challenges and harassment from people living near them. Maybe you've been there. Perhaps you've started a project and quickly faced discouragement or challenge. The returning exiles did what we have done - they stopped. They stopped rebuilding the temple. They were stalled for 15 years.

This is where Haggai comes on the scene, around 520 BC with the temple is in ruins. The people have given their energy to their own houses, while the house of God remained in rubble for 15 years. You can get a sense of the apathy, which Haggai sought to challenge. You get a sense of how the people were stalled. Their apathy was expressed in their motto, "The time has not yet come..." The calling of God was to rebuild the temple 15 years ago. The right time was now.

It is always the right time to fulfill the call of God. There are certain things one should wait for, but there are also certain things for which now is always the right time. Apathy had set in, and the people lost sight that now was always the right time to follow God. Haggai's task was to awaken the people, to call them to something new after 15 years of apathy, which is a compelling picture of grace. Fifteen years of apathy was not enough for them to exhaust the grace of God. God was calling them to obedience once again.

I like how Haggai frames his message for awakening. He asks people to consider what life has been like. His approach is to inspire them to act by pointing out that life has not been working out as they hoped.

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but 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.” vv. 5-6

Their life experience had been a disappointment (planted much, harvested little), dissatisfaction (eat but never enough), discomfort (drink, but never satisfied), and distress (wages lost). In other words, life wasn't working. The choices they made got them to that place, but is that what they wanted going into the future? An example of this line of thought in the present age was in the 1980 U.S. presidential election debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Reagan posed this question. "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" The implication was that the choices made in the past got them to the present. If we want something different for the future, we need to make new choices.

Haggai is saying. "Give careful thought to your ways." Are you really better off? Has your approach for the last 15 years gotten you to where you want to be? He's calling them to wake up to something new. There are times for perseverance. There are times for doing the right thing and pushing through difficult circumstances. That's not this message. Haggai is saying that they put off something that they needed to take up. He's called them to make a change in what they were doing. We can see in verse nine why life hadn't worked out.

What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. *"Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house (v.9b).* The Hebrew word for busy means to run after. "You've run after your own home." Meanwhile, the thing that God wants you to do lies in ruins. A change is needed. They were giving their attention to something God had not given them to do in that particular order.

Which stirs a question - isn't it an okay thing for them to work on their house? Coming back from exile, everything is in ruins - including the places where they need to live. Shouldn't they spend time and energy getting their house together? That was not the point. The point was that things had gotten disordered.

In the fourth century, the African bishop, Augustine, had this fascinating concept. He talked about the energy and passion with which we give attention to things, and he said that energy and passion could get disordered. Augustine called it disordered love. He said that you could love in the right way or you can love in the wrong way. He said that people who love things the right way,

"do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally."

In other words, there are things to which you give your attention that is worth a large portion of your attention, but there are other things in your world that are worth less of your attention.

For example, think of the tension of work and family. He's not saying that you shouldn't enjoy your job or be good at your job. But your job is not worth more attention than your spouse or family. If you're working all the time while neglecting your family, something is disordered and needs to change. Work should have a certain amount of attention and energy. But other things (and people) should get more. Disorder happens when we give primacy to things or people that aren't designed to be elevated, or when we don't give primacy to things or people that need to be elevated.

That's what Haggai is getting at with his audience. It's not that houses are bad, it's just they've used this excuse for 15 years of apathy, not doing the very thing God has called them to do. Something needs to change. You can put this principle on top of Haggai's message: rebuilding requires a reorder. To see something different in the future requires a different choice in the present. If they wanted something different, if they wanted a future different than what they experienced, something needed to change in their present. That's what Haggai is calling them to do. At the end of chapter one, we read the response of the people. They obey the message of God through Haggai.

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, 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. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord. So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month. vv. 12-14

The people obeyed because they saw something of God in what Haggai was calling them to do. This would be a great definition of obedience: your choice to say yes to the grace of God now.

Not only do they obey, but then we see God's response to their obedience. "I am with you," - which is exactly what you want to hear. When we're struggling to obey, when we're taking a risk to obey, the very thing we need to hear is that God is with us. When we're taking a risk to make a new choice, when we're taking a risk to give up something that God's calling us to give up, what we deeply need to know is that He has not abandoned us.

Not only that, but God's not done. The Lord stirred up their spirit. One of the ways to define the Hebrew word is "to awaken." Not only is God going to go with them, but He is also going to awaken them to the new task. What sin left in ruins; grace begins to rebuild. What disobedience had left in ruins grace begins to rebuild. Maybe you need to hear that today. Perhaps there are

areas of your life that have been marked by disobedience. Maybe there are areas of your life that have been marked by apathy. You need to hear today that grace has not run out. The stirring and the presence of God is still available for you today. Whatever has been destroyed, whatever has been left in ruins grace can rebuild.

Ephesians 2:21-22

One of my favorite letters of the apostle Paul is his letter to the church in Ephesus. At the end of chapter two of the letter of Ephesians, Paul says something fascinating about what Jesus has done for people that fit with our story today. In the context of reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, Paul says that in Jesus, *"the whole building is joined together and rises to become a Holy temple in the Lord."* That's a great statement. And then he makes it more personal. In Jesus, *"you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."*

In other words, what happens when people say yes to Jesus? Rebuilding happens. Something can change in your story because of what Jesus has done for you. What sin has destroyed in your life; Jesus can rebuild for good. Maybe disordered love has separated you in from God. If that's you, grace can rebuild what sin has left in ruins. You can be built together again.

Steward and Relinquish

What are some ways that we can enact this in our life? As I thought about Haggai's message, two words came to my mind for us. The first word is steward. I used not to like that word, but I have grown now to love it. To steward means to manage. The idea is that God has given you something to look after. God has given people in your life with whom to relate. You are tasked to look after whatever task or relationship that God has given to you. Perhaps your default is to view life passively, not realizing that what God has given to you He has called you to look after and care for.

To steward starts by asking yourself the question, "What God have you given to me today?" I'm going to give my attention to that. Maybe the first step out of apathy, the first step to a different future, is the awareness that God has given you something to take up today. Now is the time to obey.

The second word is relinquish. Not only has God given you things to look after, but there are also things you've run after that God has not given you. Just as the people in Haggai's day ran after their homes while the temple lay in ruins, perhaps you've run after something that God has not given to you. And sometimes the only way out of that situation is to be willing to endure loss.

One of the fascinating aspects of the writing of the prophets in the Scripture is the theme of God calling His people to give up to see the new thing. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann,

wrote, "YHWH is ready with newness. It is, however, a newness only given when Israel has relinquished what has been treasured and lost. Only in the work of relinquishment is newness given." Sometimes we want to hold on to things that God never gave to us to take hold of and then frustrated that we're not experiencing a different future. A new way forward sometimes means that you need to relinquish what isn't part of God's story is for you.

As you think about Haggai's message to the people of his day, maybe the way forward for you is a stewardship issue. Perhaps God has given you something to which you have not given your time and attention. Perhaps the way forward is a relinquishment decision. Maybe there is something you need to give up that is not part of God's future for you. Whatever your story with God, there is grace for you in the person of Jesus. He's building something new in you.

I want to close with this Jesuit prayer. It's a prayer of detachment, to join the future to which God is inviting you.

I beg of you, my Lord, to remove anything which separates me from you, and you from me. Remove anything that makes me unworthy of your sight, your control,...of your speech and conversation, of your benevolence and love. Cast from me every evil that stands in the way of my seeing you, hearing, tasting, savoring, and touching you; fearing and being mindful of you; knowing, trusting, loving, and possessing you; being conscious of your presence and, as far as may be, enjoying you. This is what I ask for myself and earnestly desire from you. Amen. Blessed Peter Faber, SJ

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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