

July 10, 2016

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Tryon Presbyterian Church

Building on faith

Haggai 1:1-15

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and ooooyou that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, I am with you, says the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

By now pretty much everyone knows that we are in the middle of a capital campaign to raise money for some much needed updates to our building. Of course we aren't the first church to undertake such a project. Recently when I was talking with one of my minister colleagues about the project he shared this story. Hopefully it's fictitious.

One day a wealthy member of the local Presbyterian church went to see the minister. "I've been talking with some of the church leaders," the man related. "We want you and your wife to take a three-month trip to the Holy Land at our expense. When you come back, there will be a brand new building and you're going to love it."

The minister was surprised but grateful, and he accepted the offer. In a few weeks he and his wife left for the Holy Land. They had the trip of a lifetime, saw many special places, and met some wonderful people. When they returned home, the leaders of the church met them at the airport, and on the way home they stopped by the church and proudly showed them the new building. "We built the most beautiful building that money could buy, reverend," they said. "We spared no expense." And as if the miracle of a Presbyterian congregation actually completing a building in three months was not miracle enough, the building itself was a magnificent structure. But it was also very unusual. There was only one pew, and it was at the very back of the church. "Why does the church only have one pew?" asked the minister. "Just wait until Sunday," they replied. "You'll see."

When the time came for the Sunday service, the early arrivals came into the church and like all good Presbyterians they were happy to sit on the lone pew in the back of the church. When the pew was full, a switch quietly clicked, some gears meshed and the rear pew began to move forward. When it got to the front of the church, the pew stopped. At the same time, another empty pew emerged from below at the back of the church. As people came in, they once again sat down on the back pew. And when that pew was full, it too moved forward. This continued for some time until the church was completely filled. "Wow," the minister exclaimed. "This is wonderful! Marvelous!"

The service began with a hymn and a prayer and moved through the liturgy. Then the time came for the sermon. The minister launched into his sermon with great enthusiasm. But he got a little carried away. People began to look at their watches. It was 12:00 o'clock and he was still going strong. Suddenly a bell rang, and a trap door in the floor behind the pulpit dropped open, and the minister disappeared, last heard quoting something from the Gospel of John. To a person the congregation stood up and said, "Amen! Wonderful message! Marvelous sermon!"

I'll bet there are times when you probably wish we had such a device here as well. Building projects are different, and each one has its challenges and surprises. This morning's scripture lesson describes one of the most challenging building projects in the Bible.

The story is told in the book of the prophet Haggai. Haggai has probably never been in your top ten favorite books of the Bible. Actually Haggai is one of the shortest books in the Bible, barely two chapters long, only 38 verses in total. In the Bible Haggai is at the end of the Old Testament, sandwiched between the books of Zephaniah and Zechariah, which are not exactly best sellers either.

Haggai is one of the few books of the Bible that has an exact date: August 29, 520 BC. To put that date in context, Haggai was written 66 years after the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and drove the inhabitants into exile in Babylon, and eighteen years after the Persians conquered Babylon in 538 BC, freeing the Israelites and encouraging them to return to Jerusalem.

The opportunity to return home was welcomed, but the return itself was anything but glorious. The surrounding people were hostile. The economy was in a shambles. Times were hard and the country was in disarray. Along with the prophets Nehemiah, Zechariah, Zephaniah, and Malachi, Haggai ministered to a demoralized remnant of the Jewish people who were trying to put their lives back together amid the ruins of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem.

The Hebrews returned from Babylon in 538 and by 536 they had begun rebuilding the Temple, but they quickly became discouraged. There was a lack of skilled labor. Working conditions were horrible. There was a scarcity of building materials, and the whole project was grossly under-funded.

Some of those involved argued that the time was not right to rebuild the Temple. Others thought it was more important to work first on their own homes, a task that was hard enough given the volatile environment. Plumbers were scarce. Even then it cost a lot to remodel a bathroom. The hardwood for floors was on extended backorder, and granite counter tops were almost impossible to get.

Others wanted to get involved in the Temple project, but there were the usual disagreements on design, and the selection of contractors. And to make matters worse the generation that had grown up in Babylon had no real sense of the beauty and importance of the former Temple. For all these reasons and more, the work stopped leaving only the foundations completed, and sixteen years passed before Haggai brought up the need for completing the project as he began his ministry in Jerusalem on August 29, 520 BC.

We only have the barest outline of Haggai's ministry. The part recorded in the text consists of five very short sermon-like messages delivered over a four-month period to encourage the Israelites in their efforts to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Haggai's message was simple and straightforward.

First he chided the people a bit. "Quit thinking only about yourselves and your own houses," he told them, implying that their selfishness was itself at least partly responsible for their difficult circumstances. "Work for the common good," he said. "Rebuild the Temple."

Now we might wonder why they would bother to re-build the Temple in the first place? It was an expensive project. The exiles in Babylon had evidently gotten along pretty well without the Temple for decades, and there were so many other

things that needed to be rebuilt. Haggai believed that the Temple was a symbol of God's presence. It was a reminder of what God had done in their lives in times past. It was a place of worship and meeting. And probably most important, it was a symbol of their faith in the future. So from Haggai's perspective to sit by and let the project falter was a selfish and faithless act.

Haggai acknowledged the challenges, but encouraged the people to have faith in God's future. He told them it was time to get to get to work. "Take courage," Haggai told them, and he repeated the message three times. "Be strong. Rebuild. Do not fear. God will bless you, even in hard times."

Haggai had a gift for being able to see the big picture, a vision that went far beyond the pile of stones in front of them. He could see the finished Temple, and could even glimpse a greater Temple not made with human hands. Some believe that he saw a vision of the coming Messiah in the distance, and even a glimpse of that great eternal city mentioned later in the Book of Revelation where there is no temple. Whatever he saw, Haggai knew that the stones and temple before him were important symbols of faith, and completing it was an important step toward that greater vision of God's Kingdom.

In the end evidently Haggai's message was effective. People did get involved. They figured out how to get materials they needed. The necessary funds were raised. According to the text even Zerubbabel, the pagan governor of Judea gave some 1000 golden "darics" to the effort (an enormous sum of money in Persian currency). According to the dates in the Book of Haggai, construction on the Temple began in late December 520 BC; some four months after Haggai preached his first sermon. (He must have been quite a preacher). Even more amazing though was the fact that the building of the Temple itself was completed in just five years. According to Ezra the dedication of the finished Temple took place on March 12, 515 BC (Ezra 6:13-15).

The project was successful because the people were willing to dream God's dream in a very difficult time, to look beyond their present circumstances, to see not what is, but what could be, and to invest in that future based on their faith in God's promises. Haggai helped them to rediscover the power of faith. "Does this building project seem like it is too much?" Haggai asked. "Does it seem too big, too hard, or too expensive?" Haggai added. "Not so," he said. "Have faith. Make your commitment, and God will honor it." Haggai believed that God will always meet us where we are, and will always help us get to where God wants us to go, if we have faith. "I am with you," says the Lord through the words of Haggai. "Do not fear. My Spirit remains among you, and I will bless you (Haggai 2:19). And as the text relates, God did just that. And God continues to offer that same kind of blessing today.

By now you may have heard more than you want to hear about our project here at Tryon Presbyterian Church. In fact some of you probably wish there was some kind of trap door behind this pulpit. But in truth the decision to complete this effort is now yours and mine. Like the building of the Temple in 520 BC, the completion of our project will require the sacrifice and commitment of everyone involved in the life of Tryon Presbyterian Church. We will not be able to successfully

complete this project without your involvement, your faith, your generosity, and your sacrifice. To be sure, not everyone can make an equal sized gift, but everyone can make an equal sized sacrifice. Our time is now, and I know you will join me in thinking seriously about your gift, praying about it, and making your gift with faith and generosity. So have courage. And faith. Pray hard, and join in this effort. As the Lord said through the prophet Haggai: "Do not fear. My Spirit remains among you, and I will bless you (Haggai 2:19).