

Haggai 1:15a–2:9 (NRSV)

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: 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, 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? 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, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. 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; 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. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. 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.

Take Courage

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Haggai 1:15b-2:9

The people are utterly depressed. The good days are behind them. Now they are miserable and hopeless, barely making do. God captures their state: “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 you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.”

In our text today we find the people in Jerusalem. It is the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month. Rarely do we have such an exact date in the Bible. But here Haggai tells us that we join this desperate people in Jerusalem on what we would call October 17, 520 b.c.e. That small amount of information tells us a lot.

We’re at 520 in Jerusalem, over 500 years before the birth of Jesus. But let’s go back in time just a little more. [Slide 1] Around 586 b.c.e. the Babylonians demolished Jerusalem and marched her most capable citizens up over the Fertile Crescent and down into Babylon, 500 miles across the forbidding Syrian Desert from home. [Slide 2] Not only were the Judeans taken far from home, but they also lost the center of their religious life, the Temple. Solomon had built a beautiful and ornamented structure about two-thirds the size of a football for the worship of the God of Israel. But when Nebuchadnezzar took the city, he plundered the temple and then utterly destroyed it.

The people lived in captivity in Babylon until 538, about fifty years, when the Babylonian Empire was overcome by the Persians. The Persians had more generous policies toward those they conquered, and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Judeans to go home and encouraged them to rebuild their Temple and resume their worship. It was a great day.

But the euphoria wore off quickly. Many complicating realities presented themselves. The Judeans had been in captivity for almost fifty years. When the captivity was over, many chose to stay in Babylon where they had built lives for themselves. Among those who returned to Jerusalem after fifty years only a small fraction would have seen the city and the Temple first hand before, and the youngest of them would have been children then and would now be in their late fifties. For nearly fifty years the captives had kept the memory of Jerusalem alive. Each new generation received mental pictures from their elders, lovingly passed down in stories and Psalms. The grandeur of the Temple, most of all, was etched into psyches of the captives. The picture behind conveys something of what was imprinted into the mind’s eye. Though they knew it would need some fixing up, this is what the returning captives anticipated.

But when they got there, they found something quite unlike what their yearning had prepared them for. [Slide 3] It must have been devastating. Old men and women with memories only made grander by decades of absence. Younger men and women with the pictures their elders had drawn in their minds for them. Few in number were these returning captives, and all of them would have been jarred by what their eyes could barely get their minds to believe. None of them were builders; none of them had tools or machinery; none of them had the slightest idea what to do next.

In today's passage eighteen years have passed since this first bitter discovery. We join the returned exiles nearly two decades after they first returned. It is October 17, 520 b.c.e. [Slide 4] For nearly two decades the returnees who had had little idea what to do had in fact done very little, almost nothing. At first they had tried to rally themselves, but they were just too overwhelmed. Too much rubble. Too many bandits. Not enough people. No money. No designers. No builders. They had tried valiantly but in vain. The people quite rightly concluded that the project was bigger than they were and that even if they could build something it would never match the glory of the former edifice. It was a futile project. It was impossible to rebuild. And so they moved about in a haze of melancholy, grieving for days gone by that they could never recapture. Who could blame them? [slide 5]

Thankfully, most of us have never been taken into captivity in our lives. But I suppose few of us have escaped unscathed in life. Most of us know what it is to look hopelessly into the rubble of crumbled yearnings, of lost opportunities, of days gone by forever, of loved ones gone from us, and of dreams that like a drifting smoke have vanished from sight. Few of us have escaped raw anguish in our lives. Few of us have escaped at points in our lives wishing with all our mind, heart and soul that things could be different and knowing helplessly that they cannot.

These things, these inevitable devastating things in our lives, as much as anything, turn us toward God and our faith, I think. We lift our fears, our broken hearts, and our unbearable burdens to the care of God, who promises to take them into a loving embrace. Our resurrection faith warms us with its promise that God can overcome even our most anguishing defeats.

But what happens when that very place to which we turn is itself part of the loss. What is the place we turn lies in rubble? For half a century the Judeans held onto the hope that they would return to Jerusalem and once again lift their hearts in the Temple. It was a bitter agony for them when they returned to the place of that sustaining hope only to find the Temple in ruins.

There's always a danger in thinking that our situation is exactly like one we're reading about in the Bible. As I said, few of us have ever been taken into captivity. But I have been thinking a lot about the fears and concerns that some of us in this church have. These fears and concerns have been with us a long time. They were with us in our parent churches as well—North Street, North Prospect, North Congregational, Prospect Congregational. For a very long time we have feared for our existence and we have grieved for a former time when the pews and the Sunday school classes were full, and when the choir and the deacons had as many people as they needed. It's painful, good friends, to fear you are losing the thing to which you turn to unburden your fear and pain. It is a fear that as at least lurked in the background for a long time.

Well, let me make matters a just little worse. Your fears are justified. The Judeans were in Babylon for fifty years or so. Here's a look at the last fifty years of the UCC. [Slide 6] In less than 50 years, from 1962 to 2009, the UCC membership in the US has declined by almost 50%. In fact, if you adjust for the growth in population over those nearly fifty years, the real decline is 72%. There is every indication that the decline is continuing unabated. The denomination has declined 10% in just the last ten years. Those numbers are for the country as a whole. In this area the decline is even steeper. Across the country the UCC has declined about 50% in 50 years. Here, in our area, it has declined by 50% in the last thirty years, a much faster rate. To make you feel a little better, or worse—I'm not sure, let me tell you that most mainline church denominations are facing similar trends. Even the evangelical churches, which grew rapidly for a while, have also begun to decline.

In a real sense, like the returning captives, it is very hard for us to look at the situation and see anything very promising. [Slide 7] It is hard to know what to do. Despondency is surely justified.

Yet now take courage, says the Lord. Three times Haggai is instructed to shout to the leaders and the people—to Zerubbabel, to Joshua, son of Jehozadak, and to the people at large—three times to shout out take courage, says the Lord, for I am with you just as I was when you came up out of Egypt, just as I promised you back then. Take courage, says the Lord. Take courage.

The Lord reminds the people that in another time, when they came up out of Egypt, things looked hopeless, then, too. Pharaoh and his army backed them up against the sea, food and water ran short. It was so that most of the people moaned that they would have preferred to stay in Egypt. The people murmured against Moses and God. They pleaded with Aaron to make a Golden Calf. A whole lot of that forty years in the wilderness were spent wishing things were different from what they were. God reminds the people that in a time of similar hopelessness they were saved.

I suspect that God was sending the returned captives a two-pronged message. One, there is a future for you, also. I will not abandon you. But two, God wanted to tell the people, you'll have to be open to a future a little different from what you thought it would be or what you want it to be. The long sojourn in the desert and the trials and tribulations were different from the time in Egypt and not always better. God was promising hardship, and certainly no return to the old days, but God told them to take courage, for God was not yet finished blessing them, either.

Have courage, said the Lord. And the people heard; they did find courage. In the previous nearly twenty years they had made precious little headway on rebuilding the Temple. But after Haggai prophesied in 520, it was just four years later, in 516 that the Temple was completed.

The Temple was completed, but some interesting facts stand out. We don't know much about what this second Temple looked like. We are pretty sure that they built it on the foundations, or on the footprint of the original. That is, we're pretty sure it was roughly the same size and shape of the first one. But we're also pretty certain that it was not as ornate. We're pretty sure that it didn't meet the fine masonry and rock-work standards of the original. And we don't know if it had its grand architectural reaches. In other words, the people rebuilt the Temple, but they had to move on from the picture they had in their heads of Solomon's exquisite structure; they had to move onto a different Temple, constructed on the old foundations, but different.

And here's a compelling irony. This second Temple, which we know so little about, lasted a few hundred years, much longer than the gigantic additions that Herod put onto it in Jesus' time, and much longer than Solomon's original. The Temple the returning captives built from the rubble as they clawed their way out of their melancholy was by far the most durable of Jerusalem's Temples.

It is clear that Christian churches, churches like ours are in a time of transition. What is abundantly clear is that we will not return to what the church was fifty years ago any more than the returning captives could return to their Temple, intact, the way it was. The forces of their era, then as now, were far bigger than they. What was lost was lost. Their desire to resist that loss and hold onto what they could not restore paralyzed them until they could let go. When they did, they built a Temple for the centuries.

So here we are. We cannot return to the church of fifty years ago, as much as we might like to. But what we can do, what God is calling us to do is to take courage and rebuild the

church on its old foundations. I don't think anyone knows exactly what it will look like. We have the outline the old foundation to guide us. That is, we have God's promises in which we may trust, and we God's commandment to love God with all our hearts, with all our minds and with all our souls, and our neighbors as ourselves. With these as our design, we can take courage and walk into a future unknown except that is guided by the promises and the design of God. Amen.