

“The Good Old Days”

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

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I’ve been told many times that the old days were better. These days I’m a minister, and before that, I was a kid who went to church, and so I’ve heard quite a bit from church members reminiscing about the “good old days” of American Christianity. Many of those recollections seem to go back to the 1940s or 1950s, but it could be whenever the person I’m speaking with was a child, or whenever they became involved with the church. There’s a longing for a time when there were more people, more programs, when religious participation was more prevalent in society, and churches were perhaps more formal. I remember hearing recollections of boys in saddle shoes and girls in dresses and little white gloves; women in hats and men in suits. Times when the church’s social events were a cornerstone of the community. There’s wider nostalgia, too – not just for the church of the good old days, but for the world of the “good old days.” When the pace of life felt a little less hectic, when there were no internet and no smartphones and people communicated by phone or letter or face-to-face conversation.

We’re not the first people to long for the good old days, though. Nostalgia for earlier times has been a perpetual part of the human experience, and even in whatever “good old days” are the ones you remember dearly, there were people at that time looking back wistfully at the good old days that came before that.

Which brings us to Haggai. It’s a tiny little book toward the back of the Old Testament, and most ministers (never mind most people) can’t tell you what’s in it, or even how to pronounce it. (Two

pronunciations are prevalent – HAG-eye or HAG-ee-eye.) But it is a powerful and relatable book, perhaps one we should give a bit more attention.

Its context is post-exilic, so let's go back, for a moment, to the Babylonian exile. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian empire conquered Israel, sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple which had been built under King Solomon, and took some of the Israelites into exile, including many of the elites and leaders of the community. It was during the exile that much of the Old Testament really took shape and was written down. In exile, the community wasn't able to do its normal religious practices of temple rituals, religious festivals, and so on, so the history, stories, and psalms took center stage in the community's religious life, and oral traditions were put into writing.

Eventually, the Persian Empire became the dominant force of the region, and the Persian emperor Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to Israel. But they had been away for decades, and the place to which they returned was not the place they remembered. The temple was a pile of rubble, and there were conflicts between the returning Israelites and the "people in the land," some of whom were descendants of Israelites who had not been taken into exile. They started trying to rebuild the temple: they cleared away the charred debris of the old temple, placed the altar, and laid the foundation for the new temple. But there were controversies over who would be in charge of the building, and tensions between the Israelites and the Persian imperial leadership. The project stalled. Twenty years later, Haggai stepped in.

Haggai speaks to the people and their leaders, Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, urging them to resume rebuilding the temple. In the early part of the book, he rebukes the people for building fine houses for themselves while the temple still lies in ruins. But in today's passage, he becomes a bit warmer toward the people, acknowledging their despair, discouragement, and uncertainty. "Who is left among you," he asks, "who saw this house in its

former glory?” There are not many – it has been over sixty years, at this point, since the temple was destroyed, and life expectancies were shorter then than they are now. The people who remember the temple of yore are few, and they are elders, but there are some. And all of them surely hold a notion of the good old days when the temple stood, passed down memories from parents and grandparents. Then Haggai goes on to ask, “How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” I can imagine how meager the temple would look to this community. After decades in exile, where they reminisced about the glory days before the Babylonians; after a jubilant return full of hopes and dreams and plans; after losing energy and letting the temple mount lie empty, the site of the temple is a reminder of trauma and of failure.

This is a people mired in frustration and despair, staring helplessly at this place which has become a symbol of loss, when it should be a place of spirituality and joy. This is a people trapped by the weight of unrealized dreams. Their vision of the good old days has become so heavy that they don’t know how to move forward. They are stuck.

Sometimes we get stuck, too. We get stuck looking back with nostalgia, wishing we could recapture the blessings of previous times. When the church was different, the world was different, the town was different, our lives were different. We have an idea that things were better then, and that we need to get back there somehow. But, Haggai says, that is not what God promises – to the Israelites then or to us now. Our call is not to backtrack to the good old days, but to move faithfully into the future. And God’s promise to us is not to fix it for us, but to be with us.

In Haggai, God speaks to the leaders and the people, saying, “Take courage, Zerubbabel, take courage, Joshua, take courage, all you people of the land; work, for I am with you, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not

fear.” God points people to the past, to the story of their liberation from slavery in Egypt, not because the past was better, but to remind them that this is a community which has experienced change, which has been through hardship, and that God has been present with them through it all. God was with them before the temple was built, and God was with them when the temple was standing, and God is with them now. “Work,” God says, “for my spirit abides among you.” The people do not need to work in order for God’s spirit to abide among them. The temple is the house of the Lord, but God is present whether the house is a majestic building or a heap of rubble. God reminds them that God’s spirit is with them already, present with them, moving and consoling and inspiring them. The temple mount can be a place for visions and plans again, not just a symbol of loss and tragedy.

And, God offers a promise: “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.” God promises a future that is good in its own right – not a restoration of the past, but a future of renewal and abundance and blessings all their own.

To the church, to the world, and to each of us, God and Haggai bring a word. The past was full of blessings, certainly. But the present, too, is full of blessings, and the future is full of blessings. We Christians are resurrection people, celebrating God’s power to bring new life in the midst of death. So whenever we find ourselves looking back with wistfulness, God invites us to open our minds and hearts to the present, and to the future. To give thanks for the gifts of the past, to carry them in our hearts, and to follow God boldly, knowing that right here, right now – will be, for someone, someday, the good old days. There are blessings for us today, and tomorrow, and in every day to come. May we have the clarity to receive them. Amen.