

Haggai 2:1-9
November 9, 2025

Good Hope

Haggai is a prophet of the second temple. It is late in Israel's history when there has been a return from Babylonian exile, and they have been given a chance to rebuild both the city of Jerusalem and the temple which represented for them the presence of God. In the time of the monarchy, it was their central place of worship. They would like it to become their central place of worship once more.

Unlike the earlier prophets, Haggai is among the few that could not really warn them that there was a catastrophe on the way. The catastrophe was behind them, and as far as they were concerned, so was the glorious golden age.

For us, all these millennia later, the world has changed enough that people no longer build temple shrines for the purposes of animal sacrifices and burnt grain offerings. As a matter of fact, by far, most of the world's people do not live on farms or ranches, nor do they breed animals for sale and cultivate crops. Instead, they work in factories and high rise buildings with corporate board rooms and hospitals and schools, and places like that.

The faithful build buildings like the one where we are now, in order to meet for worship and service, teaching and fellowship, proclamation and prayer. And yet, it is still possible for us to despair. Part of the message even to us is that the world's future is

brighter than its past; the church's future is brighter than its past, our individual futures are brighter than our individual pasts. Our heavenly future is better than our earthly present. The message is spoken loudest by the prophets when it seems least likely to be true.

Yesterday was the Old Testament class over in Sunbury that I have been talking about recently. In considering the entire collection of thirty-nine books as an integrated whole, and presenting it in such a brief time, one is confronted with the importance of the prophetic understanding of the world.

I hesitate to use this word, "prophetic," because it has in the modern era come to be associated with a certain understanding of the end times, highly predictive, sometimes excessive. I refer, by the use of this term, to the influence of Israel's prophetic movement and literature on the message of the Old Testament, and the Bible generally.

The prophetic vision is threefold. It is a very clear-minded confrontation with reality, the reality of the human tragedy, which is the tragedy of the mess of the world and the human responsibility for it. It is the reality that no matter how right we are about the role that other people have played, we cannot escape our own part in it. It is not healthy to try and pretend that we are not as responsible as anyone else. That is why the prophets could be so confrontational. It is also the message of our mortality, and the longing for meaningfulness in life.

Secondly, It is the prediction that one way or another our participation in the mess will be met with catastrophe, with negative consequences. The house, so to speak, the world of our making, will crash down upon us and no one will escape. Occasionally, it does crash down.

As it turns out, after having been conquered Solomon's Temple had been left to crumble and turn into a ruin. There was a sense of failure at the daunting prospect of building a new temple that in glory would rival the grandeur of the previous era.

Since words often fail to adequately communicate reality, it will sometimes turn out to be worse than the words we use to describe it. Language fails us, but when *it* happens, sometimes it's so bad that we don't say, "it wasn't as bad as all the things we said." It was worse. It was certainly worse for Israel. In countless other situations, it has been worse.

It is the third part of the three-fold vision that is truly prophetic. The final part of the prophet's dream is that the catastrophe is not the last word. Rather, the grace that called us into being, also stays with us through the tragedy and accompanies us, and calls us into a future that is also impossible to define with words.

As weak as words are we can hear it in Haggai's conclusion, "the future building will be better than the former one." That to which we march is better than what we left behind. God redeems the past for the future. Perhaps it should be said this way, "God

redeems our past for God's future." And the dream is so spectacular it is hard to imagine.

Humanity has typically failed to submit obediently to God's purposes and how the people God has made figure into it and how they should think about it. Dependence upon God and in many ways obedience to God has been replaced with human self-assertion (Brueggeman).

The consequences are not good, of course. Yet God is faithful and redeems, staying with us until his purposes are fulfilled; staying with rebellious humanity until it gladly participates as God has called it and purposed it to participate. The result is a glorious future to be accepted with praise and thanksgiving.

The future is not mainly for Israel only but for the whole world, and it is not for the church only but for all the people. The role of Israel was and of the Church is to bear witness, and to believe and proclaim this messages true. In this sense we are priests to the world.

The final few weeks of the church year is upon us, and it focuses our attention on this old theological word that is meant to reflect the highest ideas about life people have ever been able to contemplate . . . Eschatology . . . the Consummation of the Age . . . the Reconciliation of All Things . . . leading to Humble Obedience and Thanksgiving.

Or as Paul put it in the epistle reading from 2nd Thessalonians, simply, “you have been given encouragement, and *good hope*.”

The message of Haggai is centered in this reality: the people who came from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem did not actually build the temple in a timely way. They built their own homes first. They thought they did not have enough resources to make what they built worthy of God’s presence. Perhaps what they really did was make excuses.

This same frame of mind has challenged the faithful in every age including our own, even though we don’t build temples anymore. Yet the good news message is that God remains true even when we are not. The clear message is that God is unwilling to give up on us, on the church, on humanity, the crown of the Lord’s creation.

God will keep tugging, pushing, and pulling, accusing and affirming, indicting and forgiving, loving and disciplining, until God’s will is accomplished.

This assurance of future goodness is reflected in the promise that they *would* restore the temple beyond its past glory, which serves as the source of the encouragement and good hope Paul talks about in 2 Thessalonians.

It is also reflected in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who brings together all the strands of the Old Testament into the new

covenant, which extends this promise to us, and to our time.

Finally, let us remember that God does not dwell in buildings built by human hands, but in the inner lives of the people God has made in his own image. God dwells in us, God dwells in you. May we accept this as true for our lives, and may we all live like we believe it to be true.

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