

“A New Camelot”

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To understand this passage, I need to spend just a couple of minutes explaining what in the world was going on at the time of Haggai.

Now you have all heard about the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, when the people were cast out of Jerusalem and many of them were cast out to the Babylonians. They were there over 70 years. Now remember, people didn't live as long then as they do now, so by the time Haggai is coming, all of the people are sent back to Jerusalem. By this moment, very few if any one is still alive who even remembers Jerusalem - these people were Babylonians. They were Iraqis. They couldn't even remember what it was like to be in Jerusalem.

(It would be kind of like trying to find a Cubs' fan who remembers 1908.)

So, all of a sudden, the Prophets speak and the people say, “Go back home.” Well, all of these people, for 70 years, had rebuilt themselves. The earlier prophets had said, “Make a new place for yourself as exiles in Babylon.” So they had started businesses, they had educated their children, they had learned the language of the Babylonians. They had learned to make do. Now, all of a sudden, they are being sent back all the way to Jerusalem - to a foreign place - to rebuild. And they were merchants; they were not builders.

Suddenly here is God mixing up their entire world, sending them back and saying, “Rebuild everything – and, oh, by the way, worry about those Egyptians because they want to kill you off. Be worried about the Assyrians. Worry about all of these groups who are coming down to attack you, and you are just this little tiny group of people - the remnants who have come back to Jerusalem. I know none of you know how to rebuild this place, but do it anyway.”

So, the people scratched their heads and they said, “Alright, we will believe that God will take care of us.” So they started rebuilding their homes, and rebuilding their businesses, and then Haggai comes and he said, “Stop, everybody. You have it all wrong.”

But they said, “Wait a minute. You told us to come back. We don't know this place. We feel like aliens in a strange land. What in the world are you doing, telling us to stop?”

And Haggai said, “You are building the wrong thing first. You are building your homes. You are building your businesses. You need to be building the Temple first.”

They said, “We don't even know what it looks like. What do you want from us? We are barely eking out an existence here, and now you want us to put the priority on God's house and not our own?”

The Prophet said, “Yes. Haggai said, ‘God's house first.’”

The people were upset. We don't know what happened at first. We can only imagine. Folks, if God ever calls you and says, “I call you to be a Prophet,” run the other direction, because Prophets have to say the things that no one wants to hear - and here is the Prophet Haggai doing it all over again.

But, we know that ultimately the people listened because the Temple was restored. The second Temple was built and - like Haggai described - it was filled with silver, it was filled with gold, and it ended up being infinitely better than the first Temple. It was amazing, when none of them thought it could ever happen again.

Now we are living in exiled times. We are living at a time at which just about every church except Lutheran Church of Hope, God bless them, has declined [in membership]. In the 1960s I think we were at our apex in this congregation of about 3600 people. We are down to 1100. We have been very blessed because we have been [able to remain] stable in the past couple of years, even up slightly. That is something to applaud in this day and age, where just about every denomination, whether it's Evangelical, Pentecostal, mainline or Roman Catholic, is down. Our denomination is down about 6 percent and that is just about [the same as] every other denomination also. If somebody is stable that is the equivalent of an amazing act.

Why?

In Leonard Sweet's book "SoulTsunami," he talks about the Church going into a "tsunami" of crazy times, and we don't know where we are going to end up when the tsunami throws us around for a while - where the Church is going to land. But we know, according to Leonard Sweet, that it is going to be in a very different place than when the tsunami started. Where are we going to be? The way Leonard Sweet believes, that the Church will survive if we are flexible enough to listen to the Holy Spirit, so that when we make that transition, we will be able to land on our feet.

There are a couple of key things that have to happen: One, we have to be flexible and loving to one another and to those outside of our building. Number two, we have to listen for the Holy Spirit and be more concerned about what God wants than what we want. If God all of a sudden says one day, "Gee, your worship life needs to be different," then we need to go there and do that. Because it is not about the way we do it; it's who we worship. If one day God says, "You're focusing too much on yourselves; you need to be more involved in your community," then we need to do that. And Leonard Sweet said the other important thing is to no longer assume anyone knows what the Christian faith is all about.

[Today] We lit 37 candles [in memory of church members who died in 2016]. Those Saints of the Church gave us so much. Ken and I did just about every one of those funerals this year. And so many more candles [of friends and family of church member] were lit down here [in the front of the chancel]. We knew a lot about those [lives for whom candles were] lit down here. [All of] their stories were so incredibly remarkable. The sacrifices they made. How their parents allowed them to survive during the Depression - eking out an existence - and still they found ways and time to give a little bit extra to who then were called the hobos - who had even less, and gave a little bit extra to their Church - barely able to survive themselves, so that this Church and many others could continue to thrive, because God through Jesus Christ is worthy of our attention, our affection and our care. And their stories are remarkable.

In 30-40 or 50 years when, God willing, we are still lighting candles in this Sanctuary for those who have died in the last year, their stories are going to be incredibly different, because now very few people know what a Christian is and who Jesus Christ is. When these people, whose candles are lit, were baptized it was a given that you were part of the Christian faith in this country. There might be a few other religions, but people never asked in that day, "What was your religion?" or "Do you have any [faith]?" They asked, "What is your denomination?" When someone asked my religion I said, "I'm Presbyterian," not "Am I a Christian?" or "Am I a Hindu, or a Buddhist, or a Muslim or am I anything?"

The world has changed that dramatically. The problem is we, as Christians, have not shared our faith very well, and now when we have young people - many of whom coming to our Church for the first time - involved in our Wednesday night programming and we are teaching their kids, their children go home learning more than what they [the young parents] know about our faith.

So part of that tsunami is that we are being flung to a place where we have to start teaching adult confirmation and adult Sunday school at a second- and third-grade level; because very few young people were blessed with the opportunity to hear the word of God. It is our job to see the inside of this building, as well as the outside, as a missionary field. What we do on Wednesday nights is mission. No longer can we call Christian education, Christian education. Outreach is what mission is. Outreach mission 50 years ago - when these people were young - was something we did in far flung continents. Today mission happens inside this building for people who show up wondering what all of the hubbub is about. Who is this Jesus and why is Jesus different than Mohammad or Buddha? Can you explain it to me? Then I will decide if I want to stay here or not.

Even 28 years ago when I was ordained, and 34 years ago when I started serving Churches, no one asked that question, and it is going to be even more unique in the next decade than it is today. When you give your pledge every dime is mission work, because to save the faith is to be here every Sunday. When you sit in that pew on a Sunday, like today, you are a missionary. You are showing that Jesus is still relevant in this world. When you give a dollar and place it in the plate, sorry Roger, when you give \$10,000 dollars [Laughter] and put it in the plate you are a missionary, because so few people know who Jesus Christ is. And, when you miss a Sunday, we are not quite as strong. And when you are not able to give, or choose to give to something else because the United Way, Red Cross and these darn hospitals do a lot better job raising money than local congregations - and they are less afraid to ask - we are not quite as good missionaries.

And so today I want to thank you, and then I want to tell you to get to work, because we have a job to do: to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is no longer just a cute little phrase or something that is done elsewhere. It darn well better be what we do every day - not just Sunday - but Monday through Sunday, or we are going to be that remnant who sits in Jerusalem and no one knows who we were. We will be a memory - a historical artifact - and God deserves better than that. We are the ones to make the difference. What we do today, tomorrow and in the coming few years will be the difference of whether Christianity thrives. It will never die. But, whether it thrives or becomes a remnant is [based on] what you and I do - how much we are dedicated - what we are willing to sacrifice and what we are willing to do.

I pray to God that you and I are up to it. We will do it together, and watch how the Spirit uses us in the days to come. Amen.