

SERMON
“Stuck in the Twilight Zone”
Haggai 1:12 - 2:19
Sunday, November 13, 2022

An artist asked the gallery owner if there had been any interest in his paintings on display at that time.

“I have good news and bad news,” the owner replied. “The good news is that a gentleman inquired about your work and wondered if it would appreciate in value after your death. When I told him it would, he bought all 15 of your paintings.”

“That’s wonderful,” the artist exclaimed. “What’s the bad news?”

“The guy was your doctor!”

Good news and bad news; it seems to come in pairs.

I have some good news! The election is over! No more commercials about politicians!

I have got some bad news. Now we have to learn to live with those who have just been elected. Now we have nothing to watch on television but commercials about Christmas and Hallmark Christmas movies.

In today’s scripture reading from Haggai, God’s people are finding themselves in one of those Good News/Bad News scenarios. The good news: They have just been sent back to their homeland after years of living in exile in Babylon. The bad news: before Babylon’s demise its armies had overrun Jerusalem destroying everything within the city including the temple that King Solomon had built. The returning people had finally constructed a replacement temple under the urging of prophets Haggai and Zechariah, but it paled in comparison to the first one. I can almost hear the voice of Haggai whispering down through the ages; as if he were Rod Serling from *The Twilight Zone*: [MUSIC PLAYS IN THE BACKGROUND.] “You’re stuck in grief. You can’t find your way out of its grip upon your life. As long as you keep comparing the newly built temple with that of Solomon’s you will never ever be free from grief’s grip. Stop basking in the days of its glory and beauty; only then will you be able to see the new thing that God is doing.”

I know something about how those returning exiles may have felt...about being stuck in grief. When Lori and I went to meet with the Staff Parish Relations Committee of my third appointment in New York I had left behind one of most beautiful churches I had ever served. The interview itself took place at a local restaurant. The people themselves were absolutely gracious and kind. But we had not yet seen the church building or its parsonage. When the DS drove us to the church, I found myself in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. The building itself was a rundown white-clapped board building. The church I was leaving behind was a beautiful brick gothic-like looking building. The church I was moving to resembled the church Laura Ingalls worshipped in on *Little House on the Prairie*. I sat on its front steps in tears. “What have I gotten myself into?” I cried out.

I am absolutely convinced that our faith ancestors were no different when they looked upon that newly built temple. Are we any different than our faith ancestors? How about when we start comparing worship attendance today with that of what it used to be some 20-years ago? Like our ancestors of the faith, we are grieving that which we have lost. Haggai has something to say about that grief; he tells the returning exiles to stop looking to the past and start focusing on the very God who is doing a new thing in the future: “Cheer up,” he says in Haggai 2:18 & 19: *“Today you have completed the foundation for my temple, so listen to what your future will be*

like. Although you have not yet harvested any grain, grapes, figs, pomegranates, or olives, I will richly bless you in the days ahead."

Even though the temple never again shown as brightly as Solomon's temple, Matthew Henry's Commentary says that Haggai is not talking about the temple as much as he is talking about the presence of God with us. *"His presence,"* says the commentary, *"is enough to silence all our fears and to help us over all the discouragements we may encounter along the way."*

It's not the building, it's not even the people within the building; what matters is the one for whom the building was built. Proverbs 3:5-6 says it best: *"With all your heart you must trust the Lord and not your own judgment. Always let him lead you, and he will clear **the** road for you to follow."*

I can't help but think of the story that is told about the ambitious young man who told his pastor he'd promised God a tithe of his income. They prayed for God to bless his career. At that time, he was making \$40.00 per week and tithing \$4.00. In a few years his income had increased and he was now tithing \$500.00 per week. He called on the pastor to see if he could be released from his tithing promise, for it had become too costly now.

The pastor replied, "I don't see how you can be released from your promise, but we can ask God to reduce your income to \$40.00 a week, then you'd have no problem tithing \$4.00."

I want to take you back to those front steps of the third church I served in upstate New York; you know the one where I cried tears of grief for that which I had left behind. That church became one of the largest churches I have ever served. They even built a whole new building with a whole new sanctuary. And you know what they did with that old building? Instead of tearing it done or selling it off; they repurposed it: they converted it into a clothes closet that now serves 100's upon hundreds of families.

Maverick City Music's Joe L. Barnes and Naomi Raine sing a wonderful contemporary Christian song called Promises. A portion of their lyrics in that song go something like this:

"Though the storms may come and the winds may blow
I'll remain steadfast
And let my heart learn, when You speak a word
It will come to pass
Great is Your faithfulness to me
Great is Your faithfulness to me
From the rising sun to the setting same
I will praise Your name
Great is Your faithfulness to me"

Haggai, that lesser-known prophet of the Old Testament has a loud and clear message for those of us being driven by our tears of grief and sorrow: Trust God...for God will be Faithful.

I have some really good news and I have some really bad news. First the really good news: As long as we keep our focus on Jesus Christ, our trust on him and not on our own judgment we will have a bright future; trust him to be faithful. As for the really bad news: if we take our eyes off of Jesus, we might just find ourselves heading towards Babylon once again!