

Past Glory and Future Splendor

Haggai 1:3-6, 2:1-9

People have been asking me about the CREDO conference I went to in September, but I have found that, early on, I had a hard time saying succinctly what it was all about. After some time and a chance to reflect more on what we did, here is how I would answer you now: It was a chance to look at our lives and where we spend our time, and money, and energy, and see where things are good, and more importantly, where things are out of whack; where we need to re-order our lives and give our time and attention to the things we mean to give them to.

I do realize that that could sound very self-helpy, like I just spent a week navel-gazing at a nice conference center except for this: the things we looked at in our lives aren't just the product of the question, "what do you want out of life?" They come out of the question, "who are you?" Who are you? What is your identity? Who put you here, and what were you put here to do?

I will confess that I am as surprised as anyone that Haggai has something to say to us on such a practical matter. I will warn you though, Haggai is a prophet, and like most prophets, he doesn't hold anything back. His job is to get us back on the right path, but he never promises that we won't come out a little beaten and bruised in the process. Sorting out our lives is rarely a painless experience.

A little background information might be helpful. Most of the time we are reading from one of two kinds of prophets. One is the sort that fired warning shots over the bow, letting the nations of Israel and Judah know that if they didn't begin to live the way God had taught them to live and treat each other better, that God was going to punish them by handing them over to the invading armies that came through on their way to Egypt. The other kind of prophet we hear about is the kind that offered words of comfort and hope, once those invading armies did, indeed, come through and decimate Israel and Judah, and carry the people off into exile. Be strong, have hope, they told them. This won't last forever and God will let you go home someday.

And then there is Haggai. He's that "someday" prophet. He came along later; after the military defeat, after the exile, after the joyous day when all of God's people got to make the journey home and start their lives over again. Which should beg the obvious question in our minds, why on earth would they need a prophet now?

The answer is simple – they were off to a shaky start already and needed a push in the right direction to get themselves back on track. They needed to set their priorities straight. Listen to his words to them: *Haggai 1:3-6, 2:1-9*

So here is the first thing he says to them: Take a good look at things, even if it's hard to. To the people of Jerusalem he's saying, look, you waited all these years, decades, for God to bring you back from Babylon so you could rebuild your lives. Your houses, your villages and cities. Jerusalem, the Temple. But you haven't. Now, you've built lovely homes for yourselves to live in. And you've spent your money just as fast as you have made it. But while you are gorging yourself and filling your closets with more clothes than you know what to do with, the Temple is

still lying in ruins. You old timers – you remember what it used to look like back in its glory days – doesn't look so great now, does it?

Their priorities were out of order. God had taken a back seat to their own interests and comforts and pleasures. In the span of time it took them to get back from Babylon they had somehow forgotten-again – that they were God's people, first and foremost. That God came first in their lives, and their neighbor came second. Their own comforts and pleasures were way down the line.

So, what happens when we take that long, hard look here? I will resist any urge to call you old-timers, but there are a lot of you here who remember what Covenant was like in its glory days, what you still refer to as the good old days. You were all young and energetic and celebrated weddings and baptisms and at one point the roll was nearly up to 300. Even just a few short years ago we had 10 or 15 kids coming up for the children's sermon, and I was proud to tell my colleagues that, unlike other churches, we didn't have financial problems. We decided not to hire a parish nurse in large part because we didn't think we needed one.

We've grayed a lot, haven't we? It is a sad commentary that we have become very adept at doing funerals, and I am rarely called upon to perform a wedding. Marcos was the last little one we baptized, and it won't be so long before we won't need a children's sermon anymore. Our reserve is shrinking, and if our pledges don't increase we are looking at having to make some rather significant cuts to next years' budgets; all the fat has been trimmed out of the budget in the last two years. These cuts will be felt. And in terms of leadership, our older adults who so faithfully built and carried this church? Most of them just aren't able to do all the things they have done for us in years past, and younger generations aren't stepping forward to fill those servant and leadership positions in quite the same way. We are busy with work, and the house, and our kids' activities; we just don't have much free time.

I'm pretty sure I grayed a lot myself this week, struggling with how truthful to be this morning. It just sounds so harsh, so negative, so pessimistic. Are we in ruin? No, but it's time that we said the truth out loud and recognized that things won't be able to continue the way they are forever.

And that brings us to Haggai's second point: take courage.

If Haggai were here today and we could ask him what his short little book was all about, he probably wouldn't say it's about priorities. He would probably say that he was trying to tell us that it is time for us to get off our rear ends and get to work rebuilding. The point of taking that good, hard, painful look at our situation wasn't to get us discouraged or even to frighten us; it was to get us up off the couch and moving. We've got a church to rebuild. We've got some work ahead of us, and it will be hard work. It is work that will stretch us and demand that we look at things differently and try things we've never done. It is work that will require courage.

Why? Because there's no going back to the way things were. Our former glory is just that – former. Times have changed, and churches that want to keep their doors open have to change too. Now, our message doesn't. Our mission doesn't. Those things will never change. But the

way we go about it has to. In the old days we would simply wait for new folks to come through our doors and then plug them in. But that's not how it works anymore, not very often anyway. Most of the people who are looking for good news in their life are out there. They aren't coming to church – either they never have gone to church or they've left become disillusioned with it and left. And that means we need to go to them. We need to spend less time here and more time out there connecting with people, finding ways to communicate the good news to people who didn't grow up learning Bible stories and hymns and the difference between Lent and Advent. We need to find ways to engage and welcome people who have been hurt by the church, or left the church because they thought it was irrelevant and self-absorbed.

There's no coasting from now on. No hoping that things will get better on their own. It's up to us, and we have to be strong.

And yet...like any good old-fashioned preacher, Haggai has one more point for us, a third point: don't be afraid. You might argue that that's the same thing as being courageous and strong, but I think he means something different. Be courageous because we have some tough work ahead of us, rebuilding. But don't be afraid, because it's not entirely up to us. It never is, is it? Look back at verse 6: God is the one who is going to shake up the heavens and the earth. God is the one who brings about any real change, who gives real life to the church. We have to build, yes, but it is God who will breathe life into our efforts and inspire them and make them come to fruition. If it were only up to us, we would easily be overwhelmed by the daunting task ahead of us, maybe even give up. But God is behind us, holding us up, leading us on. Left to our own devices we would be plugging away trying to recapture the good old days, to get back those former glories. But God is at work shaping future splendors.

You'll notice that I didn't do like Haggai did and make the comparison between the state of your homes and the state of the church. I can't be the one to look at your lives and homes and habits and tell you if your priorities are out of whack. Each one of us has to do that for him or her self. But what I will say is this: being the church, building up the church HAS to become a priority for us. Are there a whole lot of other things out there competing for our time and attention and energy and financial resources? Of course there are. But can we rightly stand by and enjoy our fine homes and our active lives, knowing that the Church of Jesus Christ is in trouble?

Remember at the very beginning I said that the starting place for setting our goals and priorities isn't the question, "what do I want to do with my life?" It starts with the questions, "who am I?" "Who put me here, and why?" And you know the answer to that; at least I hope you do. We just need reminding sometimes. You are a child of God, and you were put here to love God and love your neighbor, or in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, to glorify God and enjoy him forever, or in Jesus' words, to go into all the world and make disciples. Everything falls into place after that, doesn't it?

It's time for us to get up off the couch and get to work.