

## HAGGAI: The Haggai Complaint

Sunday, August 18, 2019

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Two months ago, our community commemorated the cyclone that ripped through Fergus Falls on June 22, 1919. The cyclone levelled 44 city blocks, destroyed 159 homes, and damaged 250 more. Worst of all, the cyclone killed 57 people and injured over 200 others. The cyclone flattened the courthouse and jail, most of the business district, and four churches – including Federated Church.

The congregation laid the present church foundation a year later (1920). Architect John Lauritzen (who also built the Post Office and The River Inn in Fergus Falls) designed the present sanctuary. During construction the congregation held worship in the Lyric Theatre and other public buildings around town. Construction took three years and cost the congregation \$60,000 to rebuild the sanctuary and fellowship hall (\$800,000 in 2019).

The prophet Haggai was a builder, too. He preached to the people of Judah after their return from exile. Judah ceased to exist as an independent nation in 597 BC, when the Babylonians conquered the kingdom and deported a large group of Jews to Babylon. The people of Judah remained in exile until 538 BC, when King Cyrus of Persia (who defeated the Babylonians) granted the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus even agreed to finance the rebuilding of the temple and to restore the temple vessels of silver and gold plundered by the Babylonians.

The Jerusalem to which the Jews returned was a wreck. The city had no walls, rubble sat heaped where homes once stood, and the temple, the heart of Judah's religion, lay in ruins. Within the first year of coming back, the returnees made a halfhearted attempt to clear the temple foundations, but soon lost interest and went to work on their own homes.

Who could blame them? Things weren't going very well. The people struggled just to get enough to eat. Their economy was in shambles. Their neighbors constantly hassled them. Dealing with harsh realities of daily existence occupied most of their time and energy. When Haggai comes onto the scene in 520 BC, 18 years after the return, he observes: *"Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes"* (1:5-6).

Speaking of the temple, Haggai says, *"Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house [i.e., the temple] lies in ruins?"* (1:4). No, he says, they should first rebuild the temple, take care of God's house and then turn to their own comforts. Haggai tells the people they have their priorities wrong. The people responded favorably to Haggai's words and completed the work on the temple within five years. This second temple was not as grand as the original one Solomon built, but at least the people had a house of worship, and scripture says they rejoiced greatly.

Previous prophets chided the people for relying *too much* on temple attendance and on the religious rituals practiced there (animal sacrifices, tithing and festivals) while ignoring the weightier matters of justice and mercy. But Haggai urges the people to rebuild the temple because he knows it is the centering place for God's people. The people of Haggai's day acted as if God had little influence in their lives. They ignored God. They considered God irrelevant. So, Haggai urged them to rebuild the temple and refocus their lives on God and God's ways.

I'm sure God wanted the Temple rebuilt so that the heart of Israel's life and worship would be restored. But if we read God words carefully, we may deduce that the Temple building is a metaphor for the rebuilding of God's people. God says: *"take courage, all you people of the land...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"* (2:4b-5).

With these words, God affirms the covenant made with Abraham and his descendants: *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:2-3). I'm sure God loved the Temple in Jerusalem; but God loved the people more. God's major concern is not having a place for the people to worship; God is nurturing a people who will worship and serve as a blessing to the other nations.

I remember a song I learned in Sunday School:

I am the church! You are the church!	The church is not a building;
We are the church together!	The church is not a steeple;
All who follow Jesus, all around the world!	The church is not a resting place;
Yes, we're the church together!	The church is a people.

The church is not the building at 224 N. Union Avenue in Fergus Falls, MN. The church is the people in the pews giving God praise. The church is the people serving lunches at the

Salvation Army and pounding nails at the Habitat house. The church is the people tending to the sick, caring for the widow and the orphan, and visiting those in prison. The church is the people speaking truth to power, fighting injustice, and promoting peace.

The church building may serve as a rallying point, but it is not the destination. Ministry begins when we leave this place, go out into the community, and do those things Jesus calls us to do, like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love our enemies, seek justice, sow peace. It takes a people (not a building) to do these things.

Haggai's complaint is that the people are complacent. They tend to their own needs and forget to look up and out. He pushes for the rebuilding of the Temple because he knows it will become the center of a revitalized community. The new Temple will remind the people that God is with them, strengthening them to go out and to be a blessing to others. Because God's Spirit abides in them, they can boldly go where no people has gone before and do amazing things in God's name. Haggai calls for the rebuilding of the Temple because he knows it will make a difference to the people, the community, and the world.

When the cyclone tore Fergus Falls apart, we lost our church building, but our church thrived. According to church records, Federated Church's pastor, the Rev. E. T. Ferry, coordinated food distribution and other emergency services for the community. The people of Federated Church distributed over 2,000 loaves of bread donated by families in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN. Even without their building, the people of this church showed this community the love of Christ. They proved that a dedicated group of Christians can do amazing things when they are inspired by God's Spirit.

Our forefathers and foremothers in the faith chose to rebuild Federated Church because they knew their presence would make a positive difference in the community. They believed that if they packed up and moved away, the community would miss their ministry. Times may be different, but the question remains the same: if another cyclone hit Fergus Falls tomorrow and demolished our church building, would the community miss us?

I wonder what Haggai might say to modern congregations about their buildings. Haggai might say that although the Lord has a nice house, some people in our neighborhood don't have any shelter. Haggai might point out that while our church suppers are known as the best in town, there are people in the community who won't have supper tonight. Haggai might remind us that while we spend lots of time and effort and money keeping this church building in good shape, there are folks in our community who need our care, attention,

and a visit. Haggai might call us to downsize or lower our expectations regarding our buildings and look at the people who live within a mile radius of our church building to see how we could serve them better.

Haggai's complaint is not that we have a nice place in which to worship; his complaint is that as God's people we've forgotten that our place is out in the neighborhood. We come here to worship God and to hear God's Word for us. We gather here in this space to rally ourselves for the work ahead, to be remind that God is with us, and that God's Spirit empowers us. But our real work is out there, beyond these four walls, in the community.

When we know our place in God's great economy, serving others interests before our own, then God is glorified. When we fulfill our calling to bless others as we have been blessed, then the church is alive. When God's people rise to answer Haggai's complaint, using the church building as a springboard for action, then God's house is filled with glory!

Prayer (words by Matteo Musso):

Here I am, Lord. Hear my heart, Lord.

You have blessed me with your gifts of love and grace.

Let me help you, share all your blessings,

And spread your love to all the human race.

Use my hands to lift them up, use my legs to walk beside,

Use my eyes to share your vision, use my heart to heal division.

Here I am, Lord! Widen my heart, Lord,

I deeply want my life to be for you.

I'll share your blessings, I want to help you,

Just show me how and what I am to do.

Speak to me now, Speak to me now,

Speak to me now, I am yours. Amen.

(Matteo Musso, 14, wrote this song as part of his God and Life requirement for scouting. He wrote the lyrics and basic chord progressions. Matteo is "non-verbal autistic" and communicates by spelling things out on a letter board. Matteo and his parents are advocates for children with autism. Matteo has written several books about autism.)

**Sources:**

- <https://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=60000&year=1920> (8/12/19)
- Matteo Musso, "Use Me Lord." <https://www.praypub.org/use-me-lord Site vitited> (8/14/19)