

## **Take Courage, Do Not Fear!**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, November 6, 2022.

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

During the first part of the sixth century B.C.E., the Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem, its capital, was destroyed. The Temple of Solomon was burned to the ground. And thousands of Israelites were taken captive and deported to Babylon, more than 500 miles away. This was the period in Israel's history known as the Babylonian Captivity or Exile.

It lasted almost fifty years, until the year 538, when Babylon fell to the Persians, and Cyrus, the Persian emperor, gave the Jews living in exile permission to return to Jerusalem. Many did return to Judea. Returning families rebuilt their homes and did their best to make a new start in life.

This was the context for the prophet Haggai's message. In the year 520 B.C.E., some 18 years after the first exiles had returned to Jerusalem, the Temple had not yet been restored. The returnees had rebuilt their own houses, but God's house -- the Temple -- remained in ruins. They had not gotten around to rebuilding the Temple, and God's displeasure was showing. A drought had come over the land. The Judeans were not faring well. They were poor. Their economy was weak. And in spite of all they had planted, their harvests were small. Consequently, they were not getting enough to eat or drink. It was unsettling. They felt vulnerable and insecure.

But the word of the Lord came to Haggai, saying: "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house [that is, the Temple], so that I [God] may take pleasure in it and be honored." With Haggai's prophetic prodding, the Persian-appointed governor of

Judah, Zerubbabel, the high priest, Joshua, and the people themselves, began rebuilding the Temple as best as they could.

Only the very oldest of the returnees could remember what the Temple once looked like in its former glory. And from their point of view, a month into the restoration project, the Temple didn't look like much. I can hear them now: "It's not like it used to be. Remember, back in the good old days, how beautiful the Temple was? We don't have the resources to restore it to its former glory! Why are we even trying?"

They must have been dispirited and discouraged, because Haggai's next words to them are to "take courage." "Take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts . . . . My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

Restoring the Temple may have seemed an insurmountable task. Remember that they had procrastinated for 18 years before beginning to rebuild it! But God promises to help them. "Keep working!" God says. "You're not in this alone! I'm right beside you! Keep going! You can do it!" God gives them the encouragement they need.

God also promises to shake things up. God promises to move heaven and earth to rebuild Judah's economy and to enable them to make the new Temple even better than the old one. So, they have nothing to fear. God is with them and promises them a future of peace and prosperity, a future of health and wholeness, a future of shalom.

Take courage! Do not fear! God is with you! These are words for us to live by, particularly in times like these, when we, too, feel insecure and fearful. With inflation higher than it's been in forty years, we worry about the rising cost of living and being able to pay our bills. With volatile financial markets careening up and down we're anxious about our retirement savings. We're afraid of getting COVID or the flu or RSV. And with Election Day

almost upon us, we wonder whether our democratic republic is strong enough to survive the authoritarian threats against it.

But the prophet Haggai says: Take courage! Do not fear! God is with you! Much of the economic turmoil we are experiencing today is the direct result of two and a half years of pandemic disrupting the production and distribution of goods all around the globe. Now that we have vaccines against the coronavirus and more people around the world are getting vaccinated, COVID is becoming more manageable. Still, it will take time for our complex, interconnected, global economy to return to a more steady state. Even if the economic downturn gets worse before it gets better, it won't last forever. And as for the threats to our democratic republic, we have faced threats before, both foreign and domestic, and we have prevailed against them as the United States of America. We can have courage because God is with us, and God promises a better future.

It took the exiles returning to Judah 18 years to start rebuilding the Temple. And only a month into it, they were discouraged. You could hear the older returnees remembering back to the Temple's glory days and doubting that they would ever be able to restore it to its former splendor. They were looking back, stuck in the past. Instead, they needed to look forward and set their eyes on the future.

The same could be said about us, about this congregation. As we seek to build up this church, there will surely be times when we get discouraged, when things don't go quite as we had planned or hoped. But rather than look back at a past that we cannot change and fear the worst, we need to look forward to a future that can be changed and hope for the best.

Haggai reminds us of God's abiding presence with us! God is not distant and disengaged from us. On the contrary, God is very near us. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. God is present with us here and now and is engaged in our lives and in the world.

Whatever we are afraid of, God offers us the courage to persevere. God is by our side. Whatever we may fear, God will give us the strength to face it. God is present with us, even when we feel most vulnerable. God supports us and sustains us.

Haggai also reminds us that God likes to shake things up: "I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations." God is not satisfied with the status quo. Instead, God challenges the status quo. Where there is injustice, God seeks justice. Where there is oppression, God seeks liberation. Where there is division, God seeks reconciliation. Where there is conflict, God seeks peace. Where there is brokenness, God seeks wholeness. Where there is hurt, God seeks healing. God encourages us to grow and change, to move and be moved, to live up to our potential, to be all that we can be as children of God.

So, whatever challenge you are facing, take courage, do not fear, God is with you. God will see you through! Amen!