

“Hope”

Haggai 2:1-9
December 2, 2007

Read Haggai 2:1-9.

Advent is a time of hope.

Faith, the Bible tells us in Hebrews 11, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hope, the Bible tells us in Romans 5, comes from suffering, which produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope – and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

So, Advent is a time in which we think about suffering. We think about endurance. We think about character. We think about the hope that does not disappoint us, how God is faithful to the promises he has made and we hope in the conviction of thing we have not seen.

During Advent, as we remember God’s faithfulness in Jesus’ coming, we look to the Old Testament. Our Scripture lesson comes from the Old Testament prophet Haggai. If you have never read or spent time in Haggai, I will understand: it is difficult to find in the midst of the Old Testament. It is located between Zephaniah and Zechariah, and – depending on the size of the print in your Bible – only takes up about one page.

Haggai was a prophet in Jerusalem towards the end of Daniel’s life, in 520 B.C., roughly 60 years after Daniel and many other Jews had been taken into exile. We do not know much about Haggai. He either was part of the population left behind when the best and brightest were taken into captivity, or he had come back early when the decree allowing return had been given. We do not know his age or his ancestry; all we know is from the saved writings and two mentions of his name in the book of Ezra. From information within this short book, we learn that he preached in Jerusalem for about four months in 520 B.C. This book contains brief synopses of four sermons he delivered.

The situation for people left in Jerusalem was not good. The temple had been destroyed, the elite of the community had been carted off into exile almost three generations ago. In the book of Nehemiah, we get this report from Jerusalem, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” Things were tough. Food was scarce, enemies were plentiful, and hope was tough to hold.

Into this environment Haggai comes with this message, “Take courage,” says the LORD, “for I am with you.”

The people must have thought Haggai was crazy. “Look around,” they would have said. “Do you think the LORD hangs out around here? He’s gone, long ago.”

Hope is most important when things look bleakest.

This was true then, it is true now. When people look for the presence of God, they often look first to what they can see of their own situation. Then, they look to those immediately around themselves. When things are not the way we wish, we often blame God or declare that he is not present.

Living in hope does not mean wishing away present realities; it means not being bound by them. Haggai is not unaware of the situation in Jerusalem. He is abundantly aware; yet his sermons urge the people to faithfulness through the rebuilding of the Temple. Rebuilding the Temple is a demonstration of faith even as things look bleakest. It is acting in hope.

Hope can be hard to find when things look bad. The darkest time in my life was in law school. Socially, I was hours away from anyone I had known. The workload was heavy and overwhelming. Weekends were for more intensive studying.

Law was the last thing I – or any law student, for the matter – wanted to talk about when I took a break from studying, and yet those were the only people I knew and the only common ground we had. Financially, well, there was no money; so it would not be accurate to say that I had finances. I remember the sensation of thinking, “There is nothing else. This is it. This is what life is going to be like. If I live a normal life expectancy, I will spend my next five decades trying not to spend money that I don’t have, wrapped up in a blanket to conserve heat, and never knowing joy. Those other people have a secret I do not have, how do they do it?”

Yes, I felt sorry for myself. Big time, I felt sorry for myself. I could not see past my current situation, could not see anything other than the things that were making me miserable. The more I focused on those things, the more isolated, lonely and miserable I got. It was no comfort to me at the time that most everyone else was going through the same thing.

It was in the midst of feeling sorry for myself that I realized that something had to change. I knew I was out of sorts, knew things were out of balance, and that I needed to start back at square one as a person. It was then that I remembered that I had not been going to worship.

I know that sounds strange to say it that way, but having gotten out of the habit of going to worship, I forgot that worship was something I had done. So, I went and found the closest Presbyterian Church and began going. Slowly, Sunday-by-Sunday, the walls of my horizons began to expand.

I went to Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. It was a large congregation with multiple services. For months, I slipped into the early service, which was held in a small chapel off the main sanctuary. I was the youngest person by forty years. I sat in the second to last pew, trying to be anonymous while at the same time seeking to re-connect with God. I can see now it was the seeds of a new time of my life – an adventure that has been so much more than I could imagine for myself. Then, it was a point of hope in an otherwise oppressive week. But it all started by remembering God, the hope I have in God, and coming back to worship.

On a much larger scale, Haggai is preaching about this same phenomena. The people see the mess. They are afraid that things will never change. Haggai draws on themes developed in Jeremiah – that is, the great prophet at the time of the exile – and he exhorts the people to prepare for the renewing

of the covenant and the coming of the messiah. The exhortation to re-build the Temple is a testimony to hope. It is an act of obedience that makes no sense in human terms; it makes ultimate sense in light of the hope we have in God.

Hope is having confidence when things look bleakest.

Our scripture lesson is the second sermon Haggai delivers. The people have responded in faithfulness but are discouraged by what they see. Haggai is unwaivering in his delivery of God's message of hope. He urges them to have eyes to see what God is doing. "Take courage," harkens back to the "be strong and courageous," that God repeated to Joshua as he was leading the people into the promised land.

Imagine that – it would be like you or me giving a pep-talk to the President of the United States. The governor and high priest were privy to much more information about the real status of how things in Jerusalem were; weren't they? Haggai suggests that they were not: if our understanding is limited to what we see and the current political situation, we do not see everything. Remember our study of Daniel? God is not bound by human perceptions of reality. "The Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and gives it to whom he will."

The modern day equivalent of the Jerusalem of Haggai's time must be Boston Red Sox fans. Until 2004, Red Sox fans suffered at the hands of just about everybody; most notoriously New York Yankee fans. Yankees fans would often taunt Boston fans with the number of championships New York had won since Boston's last World Series win in 1918. Red Sox fans, on the other hand, counted the years.

My mom grew up in Arlington, Massachusetts as a Red Sox fan; she switched loyalties to the Phillies as we were growing up, but the lessons she learned as a Red Sox fan were not lost on us. There was the hope that things would change even when things went down a familiar path of disaster. In 1975, we thrilled at seeing Carlton Fisk's home run in Game 6 of the World Series, only to see the joy dashed by Cincinnati's Big Red Machine in Game 7. In 1986, our house as rooting heavily for the Red Sox – partly for Mom and partly because we absolutely could not stand the Mets – and were saddened for a few days after the ball went through Bill Buckner's legs.

As kids, we had our own disappointments as Phillies fans in dealing with the Dodgers. Yet the devastation of losing playoffs were always cast in terms of "at least we were not as bad off as Red Sox fans."

It is interesting to talk with Red Sox fans since 2004. I heard an interview with Matt Damon, who is famously a Red Sox fan. He talked about how significant a change in self-identity it was for him and for many of his friends when the Red Sox won. A psychic weight had been lifted from them. They now have to live in the realization and appreciation of the joy of a hope fulfilled.

All of which is different from Cubs fans, who never expect their team to win. Same curse, different set of expectations. The Cubs are known as "loveable losers." Hopeless. They live in the realized expectation of disappointment. Red Sox fans on the other hand, persisted in the confidence that their day would come.

And this gets me back to the point. Hope is having confidence that what has gone before is not the whole story. God has more to reveal. Like baseball, we look forward in hope. Like baseball, we struggle to understand God's timing when things do not go right.

Living in hope means having confidence that God will be faithful to his promises. Do you live trusting God's promises or is your hope shaken by what you see all around?

Do you think about God's promises? Are you living in the expectation of Christ's return? We talked about this last week, when we talked about the church going on a journey to the coronation of the King of kings. If the here and now is all there is, then there is no reason for hope. But we are not sitting still, we are moving. God is not sitting still, either; God is moving us closer and closer to the time of the ultimate realization of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Hope is assured when we hope in God.

It can be tough to remember why we hope in the midst of the Christmas season. The use of songs of the church to sell merchandise, being overwhelmed with busy-ness that keeps us running from one thing to the next in the hopes that we do not miss something thereby risking offending anyone, and the burden of trying to buy things for people who already have everything gives the impression that *surviving* Christmas is an accomplishment.

The feeling of trying to do it all ourselves is hopeless. Good. It should feel that way.

Our hope is assured only when we hope in God.

And, if I might digress for a moment, God does not need us to defend him, God wants us to trust him. I have received more than a dozen e-mails regarding the upcoming movie release, "The Golden Compass." I have not read the books, nor do I know much about the movie. However, the concern is that the movie is marketed to children; and Christian children ought not be influenced by something written by someone who is an advocate for atheism. Fine, I agree. If it will not be edifying, do not go.

The amount of energy being expended in order to warn people off this movie rivals the effort to keep people away from the Da Vinci Code. I appreciate people wanting to be good stewards of their children.. However, the scope of the organized effort against this movie seems out of proportion and a little misplaced. Children have access to overtly murderous video games in their homes. On their home computers, children have access to the most explicit pornography on-line. The Roman Catholic Church did not collapse simply because of the release of the Da Vinci Code. Neither will Christianity fold because of a movie or a book.

Please hear my point: we cannot by our own efforts eliminate evil; we cannot by our own efforts do away with all that exists in rebellion against God. Avoiding evil is not a recipe for hope, often it serves to foster fear. Our job is to bear witness to the good news. Our job is to set our eyes on God and to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. God wants us to trust in him.

In a world that denies God's goodness and the reality of Jesus Christ, the marvel and the mystery of Christmas is that God *is* sovereign. God *is* faithful to the promises he has made. Hope is the confidence that comes from spending time in the good news of what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ – the promise of his coming, the incarnation, his life, his death, and his resurrection – and hope is the confidence that God will continue to be faithful to his promises in Christ's return and the ultimate manifestation of the glorious Kingdom of Heaven.

Hope is assured when we hope in God. "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," begins the hymn, "I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' Name." And the chorus, "On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand."

Advent reminds us of how God has been faithful; it is the assurance that God will be faithful. That is hope. There are no circumstances over which God is not sovereign; he is victorious even over death.

That hope brings us to the table – the table that Jesus set, the table that Jesus commanded and invited us to come, the table that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Why do we do this? For those variety of reasons, but not least of which is to base our hope for the future on how God has already been faithful to his promises; promises he made hundreds of years before. As one commentator noted, Haggai, "could not see that the temple would eventually be replaced with a cross, and the ring with a crown of thorns."¹ Haggai could not see it, but we can.

Friends, as we enter this Advent season, "Take courage," says the LORD, "my Spirit abides among you; do not fear." That is the reason for our hope.

8:45 invitation
10:00

¹ Ralph Smith, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32, Haggai, p. 150.