

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, November 6, 2022

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Haggai 1:15b - 2:9

If you are not long in the Presbyterian tradition or in some other reformed traditions, you might not know of what it is we celebrate this day. And so I think our children's time was very informative in that way, and we understand that all God's children are saints; and today we we pause and we remember those saints that are amongst us but also have gone on to glory. And so later on when we're sharing communion together, we'll read what we call a necrology; and we'll get to hear aloud the names of those great Saints who have gone to be with God in the last year. Our lectionary text this day is from Haggai, and this is not a book that we spend a lot of time in and...and yet I'm grateful for the authors of the lectionary because they gave me lots of big words and long names to pronounce this morning for you. We're in the end of the first chapter moving into the second chapter of Haggai, and here's what I think it's important for us to know. It's often in scripture difficult for us to name the exact time of the writing of a prophet, or let's say for particularly this morning, an author generally, but a prophet particularly. Okay, but we're actually able, because of the specificity with which the author gives around time, we're able to learn together that that this prophetic word that we are going to hear this morning actually was composed sometime between mid-August and mid-December of the year 520 BCE– mid-August and mid-December of 520 BCE. That's helpful for us because I think it speaks particularly to the time that we are in, as we move into an important week in the civic life of our city and our state and, of course, our nation. We want to be mindful of these words, so I'll read beginning at the end of the first chapter and through the ninth verse of the second.

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joseph, son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joseph, 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, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So any good storyteller is looking for a hook, a way in. You practice homiletics like Courtney and I get to do every once in a while, and some others amongst you as well, and you know that you want to have something at the very beginning to grab people's attention. Sometimes that happens and sometimes it doesn't. You want to set the hook.

It's interesting to look back at the prophetic word and to see the way in which the prophet does that. Perhaps you missed it. "In the second year of King Darius in the seventh month on the 21st day of the month"—here's the hook y'all—"The word of the Lord came."

This is where those who are hearing or reading this text would have sat up at attention. They would have paid attention to who was in leadership and what month and what day it was, indeed, but they're not reading or hearing this word proclaimed just so that they can hear the intellectual musings of a rabbi. That's not what they're here for. They are here for that next line, "The word of the Lord came."

Well this prophet says, or this writing says, that it came by the prophet Haggai; and so we together then, we lean in collectively with the people, so the hook has been laid for us. What is this though, the word that the Lord will speak?

And what we hear is this question to the people who have gathered there that day, "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? Who remembers, people, what this place used to look like?"

'Not just our gathering here, because this prophet is not speaking just to the gathered people, but of an entire city, an entire community. The exiles have made their way back to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem looks completely different than it used to look. The temple has been destroyed. Scripture tells us that there were probably a handful of people who began work on reconstructing the temple, but then they...they lost energy. You might imagine they felt overwhelmed at the prospect of the work that lay ahead of them. Who was here to experience the former beauty and glory of this city and of this community, of this church, and how does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Doesn't it fall short of what you would hope it to be, this city in which you live, this country in which you are gathered? There is a former glory. The prophet speaks, "Take courage, says the Lord. Take courage." Three times it is repeated. "Take courage all you people to the land," says the Lord. "Take courage and work, for I am with you," says the Lord of hosts. "According to the promises I made to you a long time ago, take courage, but work." Interesting that for us this day the prophet's message would be one of encouragement to the people. You look around you and you see desolation, you worry about what lies ahead for your community, but "take courage, take courage, o people, all you people, because I promised you long ago that I would be with you."

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The people would have heard this, and they would have known that it was the word of God to them. They would have known that the Lord had spoken through the prophet, and then they would have heard this, “My spirit abides among you; do not fear.”

For thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Once again in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land I will shake all of the nations, and the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former.’”

You grieve over what was and you can do that.

You tire of the labor that lies ahead and that's normal.

But there is a glory that is to be imagined only in the mind of God that will be greater than all you're remembering. It will be more prosperous. It will be more bent towards justice. It will be more equitable. It'll be more holistic. It'll be more of a reflection of the Divine than even that which you remember.

I thought about that as we move into a significant week in the life of our nation.

Many of you have probably already cast your ballots. Some of you, if it is your tradition like it is mine, will stand in line on Election Day.

And then we will wait for the results. Some that will surprise us, some that will bring excitement, others that will bring great worry.

As I read through the text this day, it was interesting to me to reflect on how the people would have heard the prophet's words; and I wonder how we might hear it this day. On the sixth day of the 11th month the second year of the presidency of Joe Biden, while Kamala Harris is Vice President, while Bill Lee is Governor of Tennessee, while Jay Herbert Nelson is the stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church USA, the word of the Lord came to Nancy in the choir loft, to Megan in the pew, to Mack and to Charlie, to Eden and to Walt, to Lucy and to Thad, the word of the Lord came and said “Take courage.”

Be encouraged, people, because here is the assurance of the good news of God. As we wake on Wednesday morning, there are only two things that we will know: that God will be present and that there will still be a great deal of work to do.

The God of the prophet says, “Take courage. I am here. I promised you long ago when I took you out of Egypt that I would be with you, and I am with you now. So work because there is much to do to rebuild.” Work because there is no other alternative if you are to help bring about the kingdom of God. Work, cognizant of the time in which you live and the leaders who have been placed in leadership roles, but be reassured of one thing and one thing alone. “I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of slavery. I will rebuild this temple and your community. The former glory will pale in comparison to the latter.”

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Friends, my hope for you and for our church and for our community this day is that we might hear the words of the prophet as words of reassurance for us. “Do not fear, for I am with you,” says the Lord, “and there is much work to be done.”

So as we remember this day, let us also take heart, and the God of the prophet, the God that we know through Jesus Christ, it is in his name that we lift our words this day and our prayers.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.