

Is This All There Is?

Haggai 1

The people of God were in a funk. Oh, sure, things had been worse, much worse. The Israelites had been through some terrible times. Their northern kingdom had been destroyed by the Assyrians, and the Babylonians had done the same thing to the southern kingdom of Judah, destroying the walls of Jerusalem and going so far as to tear down Solomon's Temple. The remnant of the people had been carried off into exile for some seventy years.

But that's when God stepped in. The Persians conquered the Babylonians, and the Persian king, Cyrus, had let the people return to the land, which happened 18 years before Haggai wrote. God had kept His promises to bless His people and to restore them to the Promised Land, just as He had told the prophets who spoke before the exile, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

But even though God's people had returned to the Promised Land, even though God had blessed them and brought their long exile to an end, the people were still frustrated. Things still just weren't right.

In the first place, and most obviously, they weren't really free. Take Zerubbabel, who is mentioned in verse 1, for example. He was son of Shealtiel, who in turn was the son of Jeconiah, also called Jehoiachin, the King of Judah that Nebuchadnezzar carried away into exile. Zerubbabel may have had royal blood, but he was not a king. He was just the governor of a province in the Persian empire. The people may have returned to the Promised Land, but they were still being ruled by a faraway pagan king.

And then there was that other leader mentioned in verse 1, Joshua the high priest. Like Zerubbabel, he was able to do his job, after a fashion. Ezra chapter 3 reports that soon after the first group of exiles had returned to the Promised Land, they had built an altar and had resumed the practice of daily sacrifices and the yearly cycle of festivals. But all these ceremonies took place in the courtyard of a Temple that hadn't yet been rebuilt.

Oh, they had started the project almost immediately. But Ezra chapter 4 says that the people of the land, in other words, those who were worshipping other gods, tried to stop them, and put all sorts of bureaucratic roadblocks in their way. As a result, the returning exiles had become discouraged. Even though they had Persian permission to rebuild the Temple, they had come to the conclusion that the time just wasn't right to finish the job.

So, they had a Son of David, but he wasn't a king. They had a high priest, but no Temple. And now it seems that although they were living in the Promised Land, they had no prosperity. Verse 11 says that they had been experiencing a drought, and that, of course, kept the grain and the grapes and olives from growing, and it meant their livestock didn't have enough to eat.

So, verse 6 may feature a little poetic exaggeration, but undoubtedly captures the frustration of the people. They just weren't satisfied. Everything was wrong. They were in a funk.

And maybe that's where you find yourself today. Oh, make no mistake, we Americans are indeed richly blessed by comparison either with most of our ancestors or with most of the people living around the world today. We have the latest medical technology and we have the internet, not to mention things like washing machines and indoor plumbing. And unlike so many of our Christian brothers and sisters

around the world, we can worship freely at publicly announced times in a beautiful room with the sunlight streaming through these tremendous panes of glass.

And yet, on this Memorial Day weekend, as we remember the sacrifices of our brave soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, the ones who gave their lives so that we might be free, so that we might all enjoy the American dream, don't we sometimes wonder if their sacrifice was worth it?

I mean, how free are we, really? The current administration has issued over 20,000 regulations since 2008, increasing federal control over everything from our wages to our insurance plans, to our marriages and even to the bathrooms our children use in public schools. Is that really what General Washington and General Eisenhower had in mind?

And whatever happened to the American dream of economic prosperity? We haven't had even 3% growth for more than 10 years. Whatever happened to interest payments on savings accounts? Why are so many millennials having to live at home with their parents? Why can't almost 10 percent of the American people find full-time jobs who want them? Oh, we can understand the plight of the Israelites in Haggai's day.

And our churches don't seem to be in much better shape than their temple was in. Oh, we have a beautiful building. But how many people worship in any of the churches around here, compared to the way things used to be? And the rising generation, the Millennials, have the highest percentage of people who say they don't believe in God of any generation in American history.

Yes, many Americans are in a funk, just like the Israelites of Haggai's day were. So, what did God tell them to do? Did He say they needed to rebel against the Persians, changing their political system? Did God tell them to reorganize their economic life, reducing their debt and engaging in more efficient farming practices? No, He told them to build the Temple.

Okay, but what does that have to do with us? We know that the Old Testament temple was just a foreshadowing of Christ. The Temple had a big lampstand, but Jesus is the true light of the world. The Temple had a table of show bread, but Jesus is the true Bread of Heaven. The Temple had an altar, but Jesus is the perfect sacrifice offered for the sins of all His people.

In fact, We know that all who trust in Christ are the true Temple, the Body of Christ. So, if we were to follow God's advice to the Ancient Israelites, that would mean we need to get busy about building up the Church, bringing more people into the Body of Christ. It's a call to evangelism, participating in our Presbytery's efforts to plant churches, but also seeking to bring more of our friends and neighbors into a saving relationship with Christ.

Okay, so why aren't we doing that? Like those ancient Israelites, we might say that there are just too many roadblocks in the way – too many racial or cultural barriers. We might not feel comfortable around the kinds of people who most need to come to Christ, and we might have serious doubts about how willing they would be to worship the way we worship.

But isn't it interesting – in Haggai's prophecy, God doesn't talk about any of the cultural or political problems that were standing in the way of His people building the Temple. Instead, He points to the things they did find it possible to do. For it turns out that they were quite capable of engaging in other

building projects. Verse 3 says they were living in cieled houses, houses that were lined probably with good-smelling cedar paneling.

So, why was that a problem? Well, since they were able to build what they wanted to, it meant that they were putting themselves before God. Their focus was on what they desired, on what would make them feel important. In contrast, why did God say He wanted the Temple to be rebuilt? For His pleasure and for His glory. So, when the people refused to put a priority on building the Temple, that meant they weren't living for God's pleasure and God's glory. Instead, they were living only to please and glorify themselves.

Okay, what about us? Sure, we pursue the American dream. We try to live the good life. We take care of our business and tend to our families. But are we really interested in building up the Body of Christ? Is evangelism anywhere close to the top of our priority list?

In short, are we living for God's pleasure? Is He the reason for everything we do? Or do most of our prayers have to do with what we want for ourselves and our loved ones? And if that's the case, why should we be surprised if we're frustrated? Why should we be surprised if our prayers aren't answered the way we want?

Are we living for God's glory? Are we interested in making God look good? Do we give Him the credit for the good stuff that happens to us? Do we Americans want liberty so that we are free to serve God and do His will?

Or do we want liberty so that we can do whatever we please? Have we come to understand the American dream only in materialistic terms? And if we are taking pride in our own achievements, whether individually or culturally, if we are looking for meaning in life from the things we have or the things we have done, in short if our focus is on ourselves, why should we be surprised when things don't work out the way we want?

So, what can we do to get back on track? Well, what did the people of Haggai's time do when they heard his sermon? They didn't become defensive, and they didn't try to make excuses. They didn't call Haggai an extremist or take refuge in the fact that everyone else was doing the same thing. Instead, verse 12 says they did two things: they feared God, and they obeyed God. In other words, when they realized how selfish they had been, they repented. They turned away from their sin and they devoted themselves anew and afresh to serve God.

Maybe we need to do that too. As our responsive reading says, maybe we also need to start trusting in the Lord, instead of in our own talents and treasure, in our own reason and experience. Maybe we also need to commit our way to the Lord, giving ourselves completely to Him. Maybe we need to abandon our own agendas and get serious about building the Body of Christ.

And what did God do when the people of Haggai's day repented? Verse 14 says that God roused them, He stirred up their spirits so that they got busy working on the Temple. In other words, God strengthened their desire and their determination to do what they had decided to do. Once they resolved to turn away from their sin and toward God, God made it possible for them to do that.

Now, notice that God hadn't changed any of the circumstances of their lives. He hadn't removed any of their opponents, the people who had tried to prevent them from building the Temple. He hadn't made His people's path any easier – they would still have to stand up against the wicked.

So, what did God do? Instead of remaking the culture around them, He transformed His own people, giving them a new heart, making it possible for them to do what they had already resolved to do, to glorify and please Him.

And how did God do this? The same way He empowers us – by His presence. In verse 13, God promised to be with His people. In the same way, God promises to be with all who trust in Christ. More than that, God promises to dwell in His new Temple, the body of Christ, filling us with the spirit of Christ.

So, no matter what may be happening in the circumstances of our lives, if we have Christ within us, what else can we need? No matter how discouraging the obstacles may be that face us, no matter how daunting our personal and cultural challenges may become, in the power of Christ, we can overcome them. In the power of Christ, we can help Him build up the true Temple, encouraging more and more people to receive Him as Savior and surrender to Him as Lord. If Christ is within us, we'll truly be able to live for His pleasure and His glory.

But here's the best part. If we have turned away from our selfishness and sin, if we have truly and completely devoted ourselves to the Lord, then God being with us and in us is also the greatest blessing we can possibly receive. As our responsive reading says, if we delight ourselves in the Lord, if He is what we want the most, then He will give us the desire of our heart – He will give us Himself. What more could we possibly need? What more could we possibly want?