

April 29: Message: Haggai 1/3 (Haggai 1:1-15a)

Preface: 80 years

Well, People of God, I'm excited about today. We're continuing our walk through the Minor Prophets.

We just finished Habakkuk, and I don't expect us to remember, but we can date when Habakkuk was prophesying to a pretty small window, in between 605 and 597. That is impressive.

But today we're talking about Haggai, and Haggai, we can say with ridiculous precision, prophesied from late August to mid-December in 520. You know, those four months.

Some 80 years have passed since Habakkuk promised that Babylon would get theirs, and Israel would return from exile. So mentally, we have to race forward, too, you know? Habakkuk and Haggai are talking to different people in a different place.

Introduction:

And so today we'll talk about Haggai the prophet, we'll talk about the place and people he's prophesying to. We'll talk about his message, which is, basically,

“Rebuild the Temple!” Today’s message is an introduction kind of message. For those of you who love that sort of thing, thank God for your unique personality, for the rest of us, let’s hang in there. I do think there’s stuff to learn here, and God will bless us by it.

Let’s pray!

Prayer:

Haggai, Himself:

Let’s talk about Haggai first.

Haggai was a busy fella. His name means “festive” or “festival,” and he might have been born on some sort of Old Testament Holy Day.

Haggai is the only Haggai in the Old Testament, but we can read about him elsewhere if we want. In chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Ezra, an Old Testament history book, Haggai is mentioned along with Zechariah, the prophet we’ll talk about next.

It’s inferred from a question in Chapter 2, although it’s debated, that Haggai might have seen the First Temple

before it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and if that's the case, then Haggai is at least 80 years old, maybe older.

There are A LOT of traditions around Haggai. Jewish tradition is that he spent most of his life in Babylon, and the Old Testament doesn't give any sense of when he returned to Judah from exile. Early Christian tradition thought Haggai was from a priestly family, and he does understand ceremony and ritual. Haggai's message, which is so centered on the Temple, also gave rise to his association with certain Psalms about the Temple. Some ancient manuscripts say he wrote a handful of them. He probably didn't. He's also, traditionally, thought to have helped finalize the Hebrew alphabet, he's been considered a part of the group that basically kick-started the Pharisees. So, basically, the guy got around as far as stuff attributed to him.

All we know for sure is that he was present when Israel returned from exile, that he was a prophet who called them to rebuild the Temple, and by all accounts he was successful at this.

Let's talk about his world.

Haggai's World: 586...539...525...

Haggai was the first of what we call the “post-exilic prophets,” those prophets who wrote after Judah--all that was left of Israel--went into exile to Babylon. The period of time for these prophets is about 586 to 400, and all sorts of things are happening in the Ancient Near East. There's major political upheaval throughout it.

Judah falls to Babylon on 596; Babylon, in turn, falls to Persia in 539, under King Cyrus the Great, who goes on to take out Egypt in 525.

Haggai's World: 539 & Edict of Cyrus:

Famously, King Cyrus issued an edict in 539 that allowed those whom Assyria and Babylon had exiled to return to their homelands. We can read this in Ezra 1, Ezra 6, 2 Chronicles 36. A year later, in 538, Zerubbabel took about 50,000 Israelites back to Jerusalem. They started to rebuild the Temple, but stopped for about 15 years.

Haggai's World: 520...515...70

In 520, both Haggai and Zechariah show up on the scene in Jerusalem. By this time, Darius the Great is

ruling over the Persian empire. (Persian kings loved to call themselves “the Great.”) Xerxes, then Artaxerxes, follow him, and we can read about all these kings in Ezra, Chronicles, Esther, and other books.

In August of 520 Haggai begins preaching, “Finish Building God’s Temple!” and he’s done prophesying by the end of the year. Five years later the Temple is finished, and it launches what’s called the Second Temple Period, which lasts from 520 to 70 AD, when the Romans wipe out the Second Temple and destroy Jerusalem. The Second Temple Period is Jesus’ time; it gives rise to everything that we read about in the New Testament.

Haggai’s World: Overlapping

The Second Temple Period, from about 520 to 70 AD overlaps with the Post-Exilic Prophets, who worked from 586 to 400. It only overlaps because from 400 to John the Baptist we have no written prophets. We forget, when we flip from Malachi, the last written prophet, to Matthew, that 400 years of life was happening as we turn the page. Judean culture was developing, messianic expectations were developing, Israel ruled itself for a little bit, Greek and Romans come and go, building things and taking over.

But Haggai marks the launch of the Second Temple Period, and he's the first Minor Prophet among the post-exilic prophets.

Haggai's Message!

And if it's not clear by now, Haggai has one message. He makes one point in the 38 verses of his book: Build God's Temple!

His ministry lasts only four months, he has four oracles, four messages, delivered on three different occasions (precisely dated, as we'd expect). And everything is precisely dated, because if the Babylonians cared about recording things well, the Persians really, really cared about this stuff.

But for 15 years, from 535 to 520, Zerubbabel the sort-of governor of Judah and Joshua, the Temple-less High Priest, haven't been building the Temple. Haggai's messages encourage them to not be discouraged, to keep on keeping on when it comes to rebuilding the Temple of God, and to encourage God's people to do the same.

And, you know, they hear him. They hear him and

Zechariah, who echoes him. One author has said “In six months Haggai accomplished more than any other Old Testament prophet (Smith, 1992).” The truth is that it’s more like 4 months. Haggai kick-starts the Temple’s rebuilding, Israel gets it done in 5 years, and the Second Temple period lasts for almost 600 years, shaping the world that Jesus and the early Church were born into.

Haggai might be the most successful prophet in the Old Testament. I’d entertain arguments for it. In Ezra 6 we read, “So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah...They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. (xx)”

Okay. Well done Haggai.

Haggai’s Success:

What I appreciate about Haggai is his single-mindedness. He called for one thing and it came to pass. He’s an example of what a deep focus on a single issue can accomplish in a tiny bit of time. His ministry was a ministry of focus and repetition, and it

came late in his life. He was probably in his 80s; enough of us in the room are in our 80s, and we're all on our way there, that we should remember Haggai as a model of what God can do through us no matter our stage in life.

We might think Haggai's lucky, you know? I mean, God gave him prophecies, God interrupted whatever it was he was doing--enjoying retirement, organizing a Babylon poker league, pining for Jerusalem, I dunno-- God interrupted him, and gave him a four month charge, one that he didn't even have to do by himself, because of course, Zechariah was echoing him. There's something wonderful about being given a clear mission, someone to do it with, and then being successful at it. It's like, a great story, you know, when it happens to you...when it happens to someone else, it can be harder to rejoice in...if we're focused on ourselves.

Our Situations:

I don't know how many of us currently feel that same sense of mission and purpose that Haggai was given, much less how many of us have had this sort of experience, one of clear calling, clear help, clear success. But I'd guess that each of us, if not recently

interrupted by God with some great responsibility, we each of us find ourselves in the middle of something we want to see finished. Some season that we're in the middle of, some transition that we're facing, some aspect of being a child or a parent that we really hope in four months--or four weeks--we can say is successfully completed.

What is that thing?

God's Success:

Because, while Haggai was listened to, most prophets weren't. And Haggai's success wasn't his own success. We read, in today's passage, "So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel...and the spirit of Joshua...the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people." God is the active agent here, the one who empowers Haggai's message, the one who stirs up obedience in those who hear Haggai.

Haggai's Obedience:

All Haggai did was do what God asked of him. All Haggai did was act with obedience; it was up to God to work out what God wanted through what Haggai did.

So, in this thing you're in the middle of, this time that

needs all sorts of tasks, all sorts of attention, has all sorts of choices that need made...do you think you're listening to God and doing what God asks of you?

It doesn't mean that we'll all have the success Haggai had as a result his obedience, because our desires don't always line up with God's. But we can have the peace of not second-guessing ourselves, no matter what happens, when we've done what we think God is asking of us. That peace is an enormous blessing.

Conclusion:

God will ask things of us no matter how old we are. They might be amazing, miraculous things; things rare in the world. It's more likely the case that we find ourselves, at whatever stage of life we're in, with things we simply need to see through and relationships we simply need to be faithful in. Regardless of our particular situation, we're called to listen to God and obediently do what God asks of us.

When those around us experience clear success in their lives, a clear accomplishment of some great task that they've taken on or responsibility that they discharge, we've got to celebrate it. It's exciting; it's great--it's what it means to rejoice with those who

rejoice. And yet: Our successes ought to drive us to thank God especially, because it's God who enables anything we do to flower and bear fruit.

Consider what you're facing right now. What thing--task, or season, or relationship--do you have to see through right now? How can you listen to God more closely in the midst of it? How can we do what God is asking of us more faithfully than we are?

For those of us who know the aches and pains that 80 years can bring, as Haggai did, do we recognize that there never comes a time when God stops using people?

And I'd invite each of us to step back and consider what we have to thank God for, because God is the one who makes good out of our obedience, who "stirs up the spirit" of others, who, as Paul puts it, "gives the growth." God is the one who works through our own work; our faithful success has to drive us back to Him in gratitude.