

“Take Courage All’, says the Lord”

The story is told of a congregation who, after searching high and low, finally called a new pastor to serve their pulpit. There was much excitement about his coming. He was good looking, tall, attractively dressed. His candidating sermon was quite wonderful and people were so hopeful. Even people who didn't like dogs were talking about how well his golden retriever behaved.

Sunday rolled around. He stood to preach his first sermon and it was a winner! Three alliterated points, just about 14 minutes, with the requisite number of jokes, all masterfully delivered. The search committee heaved a big sigh of relief - the worry lines left the treasurer's face. The whole town was a twitter, even the Catholics were talking about him.

The second week, the worship service was rolling right along, and all was going well. He started the sermon. Suddenly even the sleepy folks were wide awake. They had heard that sermon before. Just last week.

The third week every one was a little bit on edge. The pastor began his lead into the sermon, and yes, preached that very same sermon for the third Sunday in a row. The head of the deacons, the head of trustees, the moderator, and the treasurer were waiting for him as soon as he stepped out of his robe. There was silence. The moderator coughed. The head of deacons spoke, “Yessir, that is a good sermon, a fine sermon in fact. But tell me something. Do you have any more, different ones that you can preach?”

The silence got a little thicker. Then the pastor answered. “Yes. Yes, of course. The problem is you haven't done this one yet!”

Just hang on to that thought for a bit as I tell you a little bit about Haggai and the book of Haggai. The book of Haggai is one of the minor prophetic books of the Jewish scriptures. There are 12 minor prophets,

who are very important voices in Jewish scripture - yet they are called minor prophets. Who can tell me why Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are called the minor prophets if they are so important? Conversely why are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel known as the major prophets? (Long books vs Short Books)

The book of Haggai stands out among the prophets for several reasons. One, we know almost nothing about Haggai, the man.

Two, the book is precisely dated. It was written between the 8th of September and the 18th of December, 520 years before the common era, 67 years after the exile, some 20 odd years into the restoration of Israel and the rebuilding of the temple, albeit a smaller, less glorious edifice than Solomon's original. Our lesson for today was written on the 27th of October 520 BCE, the beginning of the festival of Sukkot, the festival of booths.

Three. Haggai stands squarely on the authority of God. He constantly credits his source with these phrases, "thus says the Lord" or such and such is a "saying of the Lord". This book is all about the message of God, not about the messenger.

Since this book is about the word of God, we need to be aware, and beware, hearing the word of God is not like hearing a news report, or an editorial opinion, or listening to the froth that passes on TV today all of which can enter the ear on the left and exit the ear on the right with no stop in between. The word of God is not a suggestion, nor some optional self improvement plan, nor a mild admonition to be nice.

The word of God is a commandment to which we must respond, the word of God is a commandment which we must obey. As the commentator put it, "Hearing the word of God, requires our response; to obey, to do God's will." {New Interpreter's Bible, Vol 7. Leander E. Keck. Haggai, Introduction, Ch1:15b-2:9, 1996}

Remember the closing lines of our opening story? "Got any more sermons?" "Yes, the problem is, you haven't done this one yet."

Listen once more to these words from the Prophet Haggai, and hear the word of God, knowing that our obedience is required, just the obedience of the people of Haggai's time was required.

'Do any of you remember how great the Temple was before it was destroyed? What does it look like now? Doesn't it seem like nothing to you?' 4 But the Lord says, 'Zerubbabel, take courage. Also, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, take courage. And all you people who live in the land, take courage,' says the Lord. 'Work, because I am with you,' says the Lord All-Powerful. 5 'I made a promise to you when you came out of Egypt, and my Spirit is still with you. So don't be afraid.'

Friends, we worship this morning in a sanctuary designed to seat 500 people. In a very few moments we will consider a proposed budget that relies on every one of us doing all that we can to ensure the health and vitality of the ministries God has placed into our hands to achieve. We face temptations: to think small, tremble, to be discouraged.

Can't you just hear God asking, "Do any of you remember how great it was in the 1950's or the 1980's. What does it look like now?" God goes on. "Jerry take courage. Alice, take courage. Rich, take courage. All you people in the church take courage, all you church leaders, all you deacons and trustees, and church officers take courage. All you people in the pews take courage," says our God. "Work, because I am with you," says the all-powerful God. 'I made a promise to you when you came out of Egypt, when you came out of Haiti, Jamaica, England, Lithuania, Poland, all those places that you came out of. My Spirit abides among you: do not be afraid.

I will fill this house with splendor, and this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts,. . . in this place I shall give prosperity," says the Lord of hosts." Hear the word of the Lord.

Friends, for certain I have placed an ancient text, a 2500 year old text into our time and place. I did not appoint this text as a lesson for today, yet here it is, on budget Sunday in the middle of our stewardship season. The word of God, given to us today is this. "Take courage, everyone, all the people. Work, because I am with you. . . . I made a promise to you and I am still with you." Thus says our God. Not the chair

of stewardship, or the treasurer, or the interim pastor. Thus says the Lord.

Friends, we must each take this word into our hearts, and see where we are to obey. In our voting? In our giving of time, treasure and talent to God's work as we do it in this place - 837 Main Street, East Hartford, CT, USA, North America, in God's world? In our living together as First Congregational Church? Yes, in each of these places. Yes, in all of these places and more.

This word is God's commandment and God's promise therefore, this word requires our hearing and our doing. "Take courage, everyone, all the people. Work, because I am with you. . . . I made a promise to you and I am still with you. Thus says the Lord."

Amen.