

“The Best is Yet to Come”
Haggai: 1:15b-2:9

Pastor Liz Miller
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How many of you all have read the book of Haggai in the Bible? How many of you have even heard of it before today? Well, good news! If you read along or listened to the scripture that Kris so valiantly read with all those fantastic names, you have now made it through almost half of the book of Haggai. Haggai was a prophet who was apparently not long winded. The record of his words is only two chapters long. It's a good one to read if you ever want to brag about reading a whole book of the Bible in one sitting. It's short and to the point. The prophet Haggai is basically responsible for giving his people a pep talk in a time when they are feeling discouraged and longing for the past.

A month ago our worship service was centered on a passage from Lamentations that expressed the grief of the community following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. We talked about the experience of communal grief, the comfort and healing we find in coming together following a tragedy to weep and rage and hold vigil. The prophet Haggai came along after the people of Jerusalem had finished their initial grieving of the loss of their spiritual home - those of us who have grieved know that it never fully leaves you - but enough time has passed that the people are now building a new temple. Their grief has made way for hope and they are able to imagine themselves in a new place. They are ready to reclaim their lives and community following war, death, and destruction.

Building a new temple is as big an undertaking as you might imagine. Do you rebuild the temple you had before to exact specifications? Did anyone keep the blueprints to the original temple? Do you put in some upgrades that you always wished for? Or do you start from scratch

and reimagine the whole structure? There are a lot of decisions before you start building, and even more once you start the work. It's like remodeling your kitchen times a thousand - contractors are everywhere, no one is on schedule, you're second guessing whether you should go with the slate gray cement walls or the stone grey cement walls.

Before you know it, the excitement and dreams of a new temple wear off and you're tired, overwhelmed, and full of regrets. A strong wave of grief returns and instead of dreaming about the carpet colors for the new temple, you start missing the perfectly good temple you used to have. You're convinced the new one will never be as good, will never be finished, and why did you agree to be on the building committee anyway when you already have too much going on in your life?!

This is the mood when Haggai enters the scene. People are full of regrets, frustration, and reminiscing about the good old days. Which to me, if I was a prophet, seems like a terrible time to appear. Because the job of the prophet is to talk about the future, to paint a vision for how God is going to work in their people's lives, and at this point the Israelites could care less about their future. They want their past back exactly the way it once was. But turn them to the future is what Haggai does.

Haggai asks the Israelites, "How many of you were actually alive when the previous temple was here? How do you know it was as glorious and perfect as you now imagine it to be? I promise that God will make this new temple even better than before. Take courage. Do not fear. God is with you. God's plans for your future are better than what has already come."

This is one of my favorite pep talks in the whole Bible because it is one that still resonates with me today. How many times have I longed for the past without fully remembering that past? How many times have I placed rose colored glasses on the past I do remember,

convinced that it must have been less stressful, less busy, more joyful, more relaxed, overall easier?

This message felt particularly poignant this past week as we moved through a new election cycle. Elections have a way of enabling us to lament the current candidates and pine for the politicians who once ruled the land. No one seems perfect, because they aren't, so we reminisce for a time or person that wasn't perfect either, but we conveniently forget that part. Anything seems better than what we have now.

Friday in particular was the anniversary of the 2016 presidential election, which means that yesterday as the anniversary of the day after the 2016 presidential election. Do you remember that day? Has there ever been a day so full of lamenting and pining for the past? For a lot of folks, it felt like something important was lost on the day after that 2016 election, but for many other people - particularly folks who live in the margins - we were able to say, "Actually we never had that experience of America you claim is about to slip away. It's always been problematic and painful for a whole lot of us. You are only just waking up to it." But when we look backwards, we can be in danger of erasing those complicated realities.

If I could go back to the day after the 2016 presidential election again, here is what I wish I could do: I wish I could look forward to the future and realize that the real power for change and justice would come from my local community. I wish I could tell myself that I would be gathered with my faith community that evening in prayer and that only together would we find healing.

I wish I could tell myself that in the coming days, weeks, and years there would be marches and protests and that in those movements I would meet people who inspire me, people who challenge my views in the best possible way, and I would walk away better understanding

of what it means to live as Jesus' disciple. I wish I could tell myself that three years from the election I would be across town at the Islamic Center with my church on a Friday night, sharing a meal and talking about our lives, just a regular group of Muslims and Christians who refuse to let other people define us or separate us because of our different beliefs. I wish I could tell myself, "Take courage. Do not fear. God is with you. God's plans for your future is better than what has already come."

It is challenging to focus on the future because to build it, it takes work, commitment, and vision. This is true in our country, in our local community, and in our church. This past month we have been talking about Vision 2020 - what is our dream for a new year and a new decade as a church? And how are we going to commit to that future?

Our Stewardship Team was very intentional about deciding to look toward our future instead of just talking about what we are thankful for in the past. Because when we talk about who we want to become as a church, it requires looking forward into a time that feel unknown. We should certainly build on what we already do well, but we are also called to stretch into places that feel new and uncertain knowing that God is with us, and God's plans for us are better than what has already come. What ministry do we want to invest in? Where in the community are we called to show up and serve? How can we honor the fullness of our past as we build a new future that looks different than what came before?

This is as true for the church as it is for us as individuals. When was the last time you were at a point when you had to make decisions about your future and you suddenly wished you could turn back the clock to a point in time when it felt like you had it all figured out? A turning point in a relationship, a fork in the road at work, decisions to make about where to invest your

time or what to do next, or how to build for your future. Perhaps you are there now. Haggai's pep talk is for you, too. "Take Courage. Do not be afraid. God is with you. The best is yet to come."

This is God's promise to us. If we can be brave enough to look toward to our future instead of romanticizing the past, God will guide us every step of the way. Even in the moments when it feels as if the temple will never be finished, or what is new will never compare to what we once had. Keep at it. The best is yet to come.

We are a people who are called to dwell in hope. We are a people who believe in this time and the time that is to come. But it doesn't happen on its own or by someone else's hand. We are also a people who believe we are in partnership with God, working to nurture our world and to build our collective future together. Each of us has a part - in our community, in our church, in our households. No one can replicate it, no one can take it away from you. The best we can do is support each other, nurture our growth, and lean into the unknown together. Whatever your role in that work is, no matter how big or insurmountable the ask feels, no matter where the way forward leads you, remember this:

Take courage. Do not be afraid. God is with you. The best is yet to come.