

June 5, 2011

Zechariah 7:1-10

Luke 24:44-53

“Truth for Tough Times”

This week the Grand Sweep reading brought us to the end of the Old Testament. The last three books of the Old Testament came out of tough times. The Jews lived in captivity in Babylon for nearly two generations before returning to their homeland and seeking to re-establish their faith and community there. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi brought words from God to see the people through.

The book of Haggai tells of his ministry and records his oracles. The messages are actually dated, and all occur in 520 B.C. Haggai was passionate about the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. There were a number of problems he encountered. One was the opposition of the neighboring Samaritans, who feared that a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem would lead to a renewed and politically powerful Jewish state.

But that wasn't the primary problem. The real problem was the lethargy of the people.

Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries- though Zechariah was a younger man. They BOTH tried to shake their people out of their stagnation. But they had very different approaches. Haggai was a practical doer, while Zechariah was an apocalyptic visionary. Haggai never beat around the bush- he went right to the point. Zechariah mixed metaphors right and left, using vivid images. Haggai pleaded with his people to get to work on the rebuilding of the temple right away. Zechariah encouraged them to put their hope in what lay ahead for them in the future, which also helped motivate them to get to work building the temple, but in a different way- by inspiring them to believe that they needed to be the best they could be- so that the future they hoped for would one day come to pass.

Haggai tried to get his people to stop making excuses. They didn't oppose re-building the temple, they just didn't think it was TIME. Does this sound familiar at all? Have you ever run into this in your work life? In your family life? (My brother and sister-in-law finally had the first of their three children when my brother recognized that if they waited until they were completely ready, they would NEVER have kids. It would never be TIME exactly!)

Friends, have we ever run into this in our church life? Sometimes we miss the boat God has brought alongside us, not by setting ourselves AGAINST an effort, but by postponing it. “It’s a wonderful idea,” we say, “and I’m for it, but not now. It’s not the right time.”

But Haggai cut through this kind of thinking. If it wasn’t time for them to build the house of the Lord, was it time for them to live in their “paneled houses, while [God’s] house lies in ruin?” (Haggai 1:4) (And yes, it actually says this in the Bible—just look it up!) Haggai reminded them that they weren’t prospering. He preached the truth: we need to be doing God’s work; to be building for God; not simply a house of worship, but a COMMUNITY of faith. Haggai stressed that rebuilding brings results, not only PHYSICAL, but SPIRITUAL. The blessing comes with the doing.

Haggai’s approach worked. The temple was completed and dedicated four years later in 516 B.C. No other prophet had results as direct, immediate and identifiable as Haggai!

Zechariah’s ministry continued well beyond Haggai’s, possibly into the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.) Chapters 1-8 span the years of 520-518 B.C. This section states that when the people SEE how things ultimately result in their deliverance and God’s glory, they will be encouraged to take up the temple building project. Chapters 9-14 may have been written some 40 years later. In this section Zechariah proclaims that the rebuilt temple will rebuild them as a nation of Judah. This prophet was appalled by the way they went through only the motions of faithful living. Their hearts were far from God, he said, because the evidence of this could be seen in the way they lived. They oppressed the most helpless people, the ones they should have been helping: the widow, the alien, the poor. Zechariah called them to live up to be the BEST people they could be- and that in this they would find blessing and joy.

Both Haggai and Zechariah wanted their people to build—to build the temple, and build themselves into a faithful community dedicated to God.

The temple was rebuilt in 516 B.C. The community was strengthened through the restoration of temple worship by Ezra in 458 B.C. In 445 B.C. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem from exile, rebuilt the city’s walls and brought many religious reforms. Then he returned to serve the Persian king.

With success behind them, the people lapsed again into religious indifference. Malachi addressed the sins of this time period. He called his people to repent (TURN) and trust in God.

Malachi knew the people were again “going through the motions”. They needed to be freed from doubt, to trust the love and justice of our Lord. One way he offered inspiration was by proclaiming, “God’s salvation is at hand.” If we look too long at our problems and our shortcomings, and even if we look too long at our need to change, we will lose heart. It’s important to hear this message: “For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

Centuries later Christians would embrace those words as prophetic of the coming of Jesus. For us, then, it is a promise already come true. Jesus HAS come, he WAS raised from death, and ASCENDED into heaven, where he reigns on high. The Sun of Righteousness is our Lord and Savior, now and forevermore!

The Bible recounts the stories of God’s people, and how God reached out to them in TOUGH TIMES. Here in the U.S., we have for a few years now been facing some tough-ish times. Our times are not like the Hebrews were- we have not lived in exile in a foreign land, only to finally return home to a ruined city and house of worship. But, people have lost jobs, lost houses, and have dealt with the domino effect of those events in numerous ways.

Friends, the church is currently facing some financial realities that might qualify as “tough times”. First, I want to say that all those who have pledged giving to our ministries in 2011 have been completely faithful- and that is a tremendous joy!! Our unpledged giving has not been what was anticipated. Holy Week and Easter services this spring were attended in record numbers, but the offerings received were significantly less than expected.

On top of this, we have been called to be stewards of a beautiful house of worship, which is very costly to maintain. Some of you will remember that in July of 2007, our church held a special conference where we learned of critical stained glass and masonry repairs that were needed on our building. At that conference we voted to borrow the money to do those repairs.

Donations were made towards this project. Even last year we received donations designated towards the debt repayment. By the end of 2010, all

our funds were depleted. For 2011 the church leadership decided to engage in some special fundraising efforts to cover the cost of our monthly debt repayment.

We intended to do this early in the year. I apologize, brothers and sisters, because it is no longer early in the year, and we are now in great need. This is not an effort to PAY OFF our debt, currently \$230,000, although we plan to look seriously at that this summer, and move that direction in the near future.

But now, we need \$43,000 for this year, to cover the payments we have been and still are making every month on the debt. If every household that pledges gives us an additional \$200 for the year, or \$25 for 12 months, we will have what is needed. If all pledging families AND every household that gives \$200 or more in a typical year gives \$12 for 12 months, or \$144 for the year, we will have what is needed. Writing a check to the church TODAY, for a portion or the **total** of what you feel called to give will be a huge blessing. We are heading into the summer, when our giving is reduced every year.

Allan Scales, our Chair of Finance and Stewardship, will be standing at the exit today with Electronic Fund Transfer forms. We currently have about 50 households who give by EFT. This keeps our income consistent through the year. Please consider giving to God's work here at Baker through EFT. I know Allan will be happy to discuss this with all who are interested.

I do not find it easy to make appeals like this. But, actually, I didn't choose the Scriptures for this day—The Grand Sweep readings brought them to me. And I do think there are voices in these words from God that address OUR situation as well as Haggai's, Zechariah's and Malachi's.

(Invite Jerry Krusinski to share.)

Building and caring for a house of worship are critical actions for the people of God. Building our faith, showing our faith through our concerns for widows, aliens, orphans, THIS MATTERS TO GOD. And trusting that God's salvation is not only at hand, but OURS TODAY- this is the gift of Jesus Christ, whose ascension we celebrate today. May we KNOW that God is with us, and BELIEVE that our faithfulness to him will lead us into a bright tomorrow. SO BE IT! AMEN!!