

Today we are going to stay in the Old Testament and read from the prophet Haggai. My hunch is that very few people here have ever heard of Haggai and if you have you probably don't know much about him. That is because Haggai is a very small book of the Bible and it is considered one of the Old Testament Minor Prophets.

But even though his words are called a minor prophecy, I think that Haggai's words are of a major importance for us today. I say that because today in worship at Allison Creek we are talking about our buildings and our future ministry inside and outside of these buildings. The words of Haggai are about buildings and ministry inside and outside of a religious building.

Many times there is debate about when books of the Bible are written. There is no such debate about Haggai. Haggai's words are dated to the month and year that they were written. Let's set the stage for Haggai's words which we are about to read.

The story of the Old Testament is the story of God selecting a group of people for no apparent reason and covenanting with this group of people. These people eventually become known to us as Israelites. The Israelites become a united people under the leadership of King David but then within 100 years they are split into two countries, Israel and Judah.

The nation of Israel is conquered in 721 BC by the Assyrians while the nation of Judah hangs on until 587 BC when they are conquered by the Babylonians. The Israelites or Jewish people are taken into captivity in Babylon. The Babylonians then are conquered by the Persians and in 539 BC the new Persian king, Cyrus, gives an edict that the Israelites can return to their land.

When the Israelites return to their land they discover that their capital city of Jerusalem has been practically destroyed. Their homes had been destroyed and the Temple, their center of their religious life, had been destroyed. The Temple was a huge edifice. But all of this had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The Israelites begin to resettle in Jerusalem and rejoin the Israelites who had been left behind. They begin to rebuild their homes but the rebuilding of the Temple became a problem. The Israelites were feeling overwhelmed at the magnitude of rebuilding the Temple. Plus they wondered if it was worth it.

It is at this time that Haggai shares these words which he tells the people are words from God.

### **Read Haggai 1:3-15**

I am going to be very blunt. There are some church buildings that need to be sold or torn down and something worthwhile needs to be built there. There are lots of places that still call themselves churches that are merely facilities where a small number of families gather together to find a place of comfort and safety against the big, wide, scary place called the world.

There are lots of places that are still called churches that have dwindled down to a handful of people but they still spend their money to maintain a building so that they can meet once a week while they pray for a miracle for the congregation to be like it used to be back in the 1960s.

There are also lots of places that still call themselves churches that can be quite large in number but what they really are are social clubs for the people who gather there once a week. These people come together to see their friends but they have very little interest in being anything different than what they think they have always been.

They have little interest in allowing themselves to be changed to become a new vision which God is calling them to become. They have tamed the Scriptures and do not have any desire to allow the Scriptures to convict them or to invite others to come to know God through them and their actions.

Then there are those places which call themselves churches that do lots of wonderful ministries and touch lots of lives but they interpret the Scriptures in such a way that some segments of our society are made to feel as though they are second class citizens. Places where not all are welcome. Places where the leadership skills of all are not recognized especially the gifts of women and people who may be different in some way from the dominant culture within the church.

And then there are those places which call themselves churches that do lots of wonderful ministries and touch lots of lives that spend a significant portion of their income in ways that seem to contradict what the Scriptures clearly seem to be saying. Churches whose leadership live in extravagant houses and lead plush lifestyles and who lead churches who seem overly focused on appearance and secrecy.

We all know that Allison Creek has its faults. Each one of us could come up with a pretty long list I am sure. But Allison Creek is a special place. A place that is doing ministry in important ways that if you were not doing these ministries they would not be done.

It is through this place that little preschool children gather in this sanctuary once a week to participate in worship that fits their ability to comprehend. It is through this place that older adults are found dancing in the family life center on a Thursday night to the sounds of banjos and guitars. It is through this place that boys and girls learn life skills through scouting.

It is through this place that people study and fellowship and play and worship and seek to be closer to what God is calling you to be. It is through this place that children in Liberia are wearing new dresses made by you and using computers that are refurbished by you.

It is through you that people feel the love and warmth of a prayer shawl around their body. It is through you that a family in Clover is about to move into a new home that they are building through Habitat for Humanity and offerings are collected that feed people and that help people through disasters.

The prophet Haggai spoke to a community of faith that was feeling overwhelmed with restoring the Temple. Because they were feeling overwhelmed they found it easier to focus on their own homes. But Haggai said that the Temple was important and that it needed their direct attention.

Haggai knew that the Temple was more than a building. The Temple was the center of their religious and spiritual life. The Temple was their identity of what they valued and what they worshipped.

Allison Creek is more than a building. It is you. It is the people who come to the building for various reasons because this building represents something very important to lots of people. Important ministry happens here. It is you and what you do outside of this building. It is you at work and play and in mission. Allison Creek is so much more that any one of us can describe.

But Haggai's words may also be words to us, however. Allison Creek is a very alive and vital place and community of people. But Allison Creek needs a bigger financial commitment from the people that call this place their spiritual home. The Session is looking to end this year short of what it needs to pay your staff, cover the cost of utilities, and pay for the educational resources we use and the missions we support. Haggai told the people that it was time to focus less on their own houses and more on the needs of the Temple. Haggai may be saying those same words to this faith community.

Later in the service you will hear some more about how you can support the ministry of ACPC. I hope you will catch a glimpse of what God is doing here and why supporting the ministry of this church financially is an expression of what God is doing in the world. AMEN.

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-Given: November 10, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

## **Unison Prayer of Confession**

We are so easily confused by what the world tells us, Watching God, that we forget the stories of faith we heard as children. We are so fearful of tomorrow, we are not aware of your Spirit with us today. We are so busy wondering 'what if?' or 'suppose' that we cannot hear the promises you whisper to us.

So once again, Gracious God, have mercy on us. You know our hearts so well - touch them with your grace. You see our deepest fears - heal them with your peace. You hear our secret longings - speak to them of your hope. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

## **Prayers of the People**

Lord, hear our prayer. May we concern ourselves with revealing the kingdom of God through our faithful commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ. We pray for hope in the continued unfolding of the kingdom of God in our midst, trusting in Christ's reign to triumph, especially for those who suffer, who lack, who mourn, and who despair. Bless us with the courage to be living signs of God's unfolding reign.

We have challenges before us as a congregation, O Lord. But our challenges are nothing compared to your people who returned to a desecrated Jerusalem. We pray that the same spirit that guided them to rebuild the Temple is the same Spirit that inspires us to build this church in a way that is pleasing and faithful to you.