

Take Courage, Work, and Stand Firm

23rd Sunday after Pentecost – November 7, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Haggai 2:1-5

In the second year of King Darius, ¹in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ²Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, ³Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? ⁴Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, ⁵according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, 13-17

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

¹³But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Take courage. Work. Stand firm.

We live in anxious times. So-called “soccer moms” have been replaced by “security moms.” Grandmothers are double-scanned and searched before boarding airplanes. Who among us does not awaken half-wondering if today might be the day? This is not the first period of high-anxiety in my lifetime. I remember scurrying under my desk a couple of times a month for nuclear fall-out drills in junior high school. We read instructions on how to build an impromptu fall-out shelter with a door and some dirt. The notion of such a shelter was silly, but the fear was not. It is tempting to give into fear and discouragement, longing for the good ole’ days when things were better, even though they probably weren’t. It is to such fear and discouragement that both Haggai and Paul speak in today’s Scripture passages.

Haggai

The book of Haggai is the tenth of twelve prophetic books found at the end of the Old Testament. The twelve books were brief enough to be contained on a single Hebrew scroll. The twelve books are sometimes referred to as the minor (or lesser) prophets, but this is misleading. “Minor” refers only to the length of the writings, not their importance!

The book of Haggai consists of four prophetic messages (oracles) from the LORD brought by Haggai within a four month period in 520BC. Today’s passage is from the second oracle.

This was a critical time for the Jews. For nearly twenty years, Jews had been returning from exile in Babylon. They found Jerusalem in ruins and the temple destroyed. Though some were determined to rebuild the temple, there was little money to pay for it. Most understood that they lacked the means to rebuild the temple to anything approaching its former glory.

Haggai brings words of encouragement to Zerubbabel, the governor, to Joshua, the high priest, and to all the people. The hardships being endured by the people stem from their inaction on the rebuilding. They are to stand firm, work hard, and get the temple rebuilt, for a great and glorious future awaits them.

Don't dwell on the past . . . do not fear

Jews were returning to Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the temple had begun, though little had actually been accomplished (see the page one text box). Discouragement was the order of the day. You can almost picture some of the old-timers standing around wistfully recalling the glories of Solomon's temple – if we can't build what we once had why build anything at all, they might ask. But discouragement and defeatism is not God's way. So the prophet Haggai brought to the people a word from God.

Yes, there may be only a remnant left of God's people (v. 2). Yes, the temple is no more than a shadow of its former glory. Haggai didn't expect the people to ignore the obvious. But he did expect them to trust God, to take heart, and get to work. God had made them a promise. He was with them before and he was with them still. God is not only the great promise-maker, he is the great promise-keeper. Things may not be proceeding as the people hoped, but God was with them nonetheless.

2 Thessalonians

Two of the 27 New Testament books are letters from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Thessalonica, Greece, which was a large, prosperous city that had been granted special privileges by Caesar. It is located on the Aegean Sea in far northern Greece. You can visit Thessaloniki today, where ancient ruins have been excavated near the city center.

Paul's letters to the churches he founded were always pastoral and always written for a reason. In the case of this letter, it seems that Paul has learned that some persons have spoken in Paul's name and told the Thessalonian Christians that the "day of the Lord," Christ's second coming, had already happened! Also, Paul has been told that the free-loaders he admonished in an earlier letter (1 Thessalonians) had not mended their ways.

Thus, this letter not only encourages those who are suffering, but also urges the Thessalonians not to be misled regarding the second coming of Christ. Paul is notoriously difficult to interpret here; e.g., who or what does he mean by the "lawless one" (2:3)? Nonetheless, Paul, like Peter and Jesus, urges the believers to be very cautious and modest in their beliefs about the timing of Christ's return.

Many Christians find it tempting to get caught up in expectations about Christ's return. Every generation can find signs pointing to Christ's imminent return. Christians have been finding such signs for 2,000 years. But as the author of 2 Peter wrote, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:10).

Stand firm . . . be comforted

When moving from Haggai to 2 Thessalonians we must fast-forward more than 500 years. The Christians in Thessalonica (and there couldn't have been many) are not so much discouraged as they are fearful. Someone has come into town proclaiming that Christ has already returned! "What could this mean . . . how could we have missed it?! The sky is falling!" I'm sure that all of us give into alarmism from time to time. What are to do when we are alarmed? How do we cope with our fears? Paul urged the Thessalonians in three directions.

First, Paul reminds them that they had been called to Christ by the proclaiming of the good news. They were God's chosen, his "fruit fruits" through whom God's saving work would go forward. They could trust God's choice, confident that they would "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Second, Paul urged the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2:15). The word "traditions" can mislead us a bit. Paul isn't talking about clergy, robes, décor, or the order of worship. Rather, Paul is urging the believers to stand firm upon the teaching of the apostles, whether oral or written. The problem of false teaching cuts through nearly all of the New Testament. Whether it was those who came to Thessalonica teaching that Christ had already come or those who went to Galatia teaching that believers had to keep Jewish law, in all cases, the apostles demanded that the Christian communities stand firm in the apostolic Christian faith.

Third, the Thessalonians could rest in the "eternal comfort and good hope" of God's love. Indeed, verses 16 and 17 are something of "wish-prayer." Paul encourages the Christians to hold to the comfort offered by Christ. It is not so much that Paul is praying that the Thessalonians will get something they lack; Paul prays that they will embrace what is already theirs.

Daily Bible Readings

(more from *Haggai* and *2 Thessalonians*)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Haggai 1:1-15 The call to rebuild the temple</p>	<p>Day 2 Haggai 2:10-23 A defiled people purified and blessed (v. 10-19) & a message to Zerubbabel, the governor (v. 20-23).</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 Salutation, thanksgiving, and prayer</p>	<p>Day 4 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 A request for prayer</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Thessalonians 3:6-18 About those who are idle and disruptive; concluding matters</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark Your Calendars – Nov 14th: Dismantling the DaVinci Code, Part II

Next Sunday, at 9:30 in Wesley Hall, we'll wrap-up our look at many of the claims made in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Though, Though this is a work of fiction, many Christians have taken seriously Brown's claims of impeccable research. Was Jesus married? Was the claim of Jesus' divinity invented hundreds of years after Jesus' death? How did we get the New Testament? Who was Mary Magdalene? Do the gnostic gospels help us understand Jesus?

November Book Recommendations: TWO!! – Both on *The DaVinci Code*

It would take a lot of fingers to count all the books that have been written about the historical and theological problems in *The DaVinci Code*. I've been waiting for books written by well-regarded New Testament scholars and I now know of two: *The Gospel Code* by Ben Witherington and *Breaking the DaVinci Code* by Darrell Bock. Witherington's book gives an overview of many issues associated with the premises of the novel and includes a glossary. Bock's critique focuses on eight questions, such as whether Jesus was married. Bock extensively quotes some of the gnostic writings referred to in the novel, enabling you to read some of the original texts yourself.

Both are available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

On top of everything else, there was a terrible drought in Judea in 520BC, the year of Haggai's prophetic ministry. Haggai's principal foes were the older folks who, though probably well-intentioned, couldn't help drawing pointed comparisons between the present and the "golden" past. In his commentary on Haggai, Eugene March writes, "The task of each generation is to take courage in God's goodness and to work on behalf of the God's purposes. Loyalty and dedication are measured by the degree of willingness to stick to the task. Discouragement and depression are contagious and need to be resisted. Haggai was certain that whatever the restored Temple was to be, it would be better than the heap of stones standing in Jerusalem's center. God wanted dedication to the task, not nostalgia for the past."

What are your thoughts on March's comments? Why do we so often dwell on the past? What makes us long for the "good old days"? Perhaps they were better, but often not. Every time I hear someone wax nostalgic about the 50's and 60's, I remember the "white" and "colored" drinking fountains of my youth. How do we stay focused on the present and the future? Haggai tells the people to get to work. What is the value in that? What are some specific ways in which we can keep moving forward, working toward God's purposes?