

Brevard Childs who was a professor of Old Testament at Yale for over 40 years wrote this about the prophet Haggai: “Haggai, perhaps more than any other prophet, was committed to a political program, namely, the restoration of the Temple. He [was] a political activist!” (*Introduction To The Old Testament As Scripture*, p. 470). Have you noticed that this is the political season? Mercifully it will be ending on Wednesday, November 9.

The word of the Lord that comes to us through the prophet Haggai calls us to political activism, but not the type of political activism that you may be thinking of. Instead of jumping on the bandwagon of either candidate or either political party, instead of working the polls on Election Day, Haggai would ask us to stand over against the political leaders and the religious leaders to do what ultimately honors God and unites his people. Any mention in this country of the numbers 9/11 takes us back to a dreadful day in September 2001. But it was a time that united this country like I had never seen before or ever seen since. Events like 9/11 hang over us like the page of a calendar that we can’t quite get turned. They not only describe where we have been; but in some ways an event like 9/11 determines who we are.

That’s how it was in 520 BC in Jerusalem. The prophet Haggai is living over half a century after his nation’s defeat by the Babylonians. Their enemies had destroyed every city in Judah, dragging off their leaders to exile in faraway Babylon. But within a few decades the victors themselves were defeated and Judah’s exiles were told by their new overlords, the Persians, that they could go home. Haggai sees that his fellow citizens in Jerusalem have arrived home and have begun to put their lives and nation back together. However, they haven’t rebuilt the Temple. Their place to worship has barely been cleared away. Oh, people worship there, but they do so standing next to heaps of ruined walls and roofs. When the first exiles returned home almost a generation before, they made a modest start on rebuilding the Temple, but soon stopped and the Temple sat like a lifeless corpse ever since. In our time it would be like a congregation paving a parking lot and pouring the foundations for a church building, but worshipping between piles of steel and lumber for eighteen years.

A month earlier Haggai got them started again, but the work hadn’t progressed very far. At a religious festival the Lord through the prophet encourages the governor, the high priest, and all the people to get on with the task. This is an important spiritual project. It will determine who the Hebrew people are going to be. Are they going to remain defeated people or will they let themselves become the Lord’s people who will be faithful no matter what? Rebuilding the temple will determine that at least in part. They were to rebuild a ruined temple in order to rebuild a ruined people. Haggai addresses the political and religious leaders and all the people whom he refers to as the “*whole remnant*.” Like a remnant of cloth or carpet, this is what’s left of the Hebrew people after the Babylonian exile.

Citizens in Haggai’s day understood themselves to be part of God’s people, not individuals who happen to live in the same country as many Americans view themselves. The Temple awaits rebuilding, but everyone had excuses for why they hadn’t gotten around to it. “There are so many other more pressing problems” they’d say. No matter how anyone encouraged the rebuilding of the temple, the answer was always the same: “This isn’t the right time.”

Both congregations that I have served in my ordained ministry have taken on building projects of different scope and for different reasons. Timing of the projects were important, but it never seems to be the right time to disrupt your space for building or renovations. What you can count on is that complaining about the church's building project will surface when it is proposed and perhaps continue until after it is finished and paid for. The prophet Haggai doesn't rail against the people for a list of crimes as God called other prophets to do. They're not bad folks; they're just missing a sense of what their times are calling for.

There are times that demand repairing. Truthfully, I think we are living in such a time. Before WWI there was a spirit of optimism in western countries and in the churches of the western countries. They had no need for a prophet like Haggai to call them to rebuild the ruins. But after the first WW and then after the worst world war, WWII, they could no longer pretend that humanity didn't need to be put back together. The need for rebuilding was urgent when Haggai preached 2,500 years ago, and it remains urgent all over the world today.

We don't need huge piles of building debris around to remind us that we have huge problems in our families, schools, churches, businesses, communities, and government. Many aspects of our lives hang in the balance. Just say the numbers 9/11 and a sense of grief for the dead and the fear that we will be attacked again one day returns. We also should remember there are many ways to rebuild. After WWI was blamed exclusively on his nation, Adolf Hitler rebuilt Germany. He rebuilt it on arrogance, hatred, fear, and violence.

We need to choose how to go about rebuilding. We can seek God first, even in the middle of our country's pain and worry. We can choose to serve God, even though our economy is flat and anxiety is high, even though there are many other things in need of rebuilding. We can first come to God in this place of worship and respond in mission and service in the name of Jesus Christ. In the midst of the various kinds of ruin around us, Christians are not to suspend worship or delay service. I'm convinced that secular society would be totally shocked and nearly apoplectic if they were to learn how much money Christians give every year to relieve the suffering of people all over the world. It's not only beneficial for us to worship and to reach out in Christian love, it's what we were created for. For Haggai, reordering the nation's worship meant reordering the nation's whole life. It's not something that can be put off. Rebuilding would serve God's glory and invite God's blessings.

We have some rebuilding that is still in the planning stages right here at Ken Mawr. If done for the right reasons, our work of putting three new flat roofs on this church building will be a spiritual labor, a response to God's word. And since we have to pay for it somehow, currently every dollar that you designate on the *Capital Improvements* line of your offering envelope will help to plug the leaks and keep the rain and snow and ice outside of our spiritual home.

This is our place of worship and we need to put worship at the center of our life, because we are created to prioritize the God who made us. Worship lifts us to the God who's beyond all nations, above all time, and outside the bounds of our momentary concerns. God's promise through the prophet Haggai is this: "*I am with you.*" The remnant needed to hear that message. We need to hear that message. Although remnants may be looked upon as worthless scraps, God assigns high value to those of his people whom he sets aside for holy purposes, like the "*remnant of the people*" in Haggai. The choice was theirs. God is with us. God isn't with us so that God can be against others. God is with us so we can serve others. We're

partners with God. God is with us so we can help put the world back together. Christians are rebuilders with Jesus. We might not be the ones who caused the problems, but we can set out with Christ to fix them.

Haggai in his time challenged the priorities of his fellow citizens and Israelites. Sure, there are a lot of worthy things people can do besides fixing up some crumpled old Temple. But rebuilding the Temple reminds us what's truly important in life. No matter what else we think we have to do, if we make the worship of God a priority we will be heeding Haggai's important message.

I wonder what we are called to do next in this place and in this church. I know that we are not called to keep this place as a museum or a dying monument to our past. We come here to seek God in this community of believers. Let us go therefore in the power that God has given us, and if things look bleak and things look tough, and things get worse, let us lift the Cross a little higher.

Haggai fought his battle against a society that was consumed with getting human needs dealt with at the expense of God. The *remnant* up 'til now chose to follow a way that turned from God. And these words echo from Haggai's book, "*Give careful thought to your ways.*" Think about your choices. Consider your priorities. And consider them not in the ways of the world, as if that were the norm, but consider them in the ways of God. You are living in God's time; your life is in God's power; you live for God's glory. Let us build and rebuild this church as God's house, where God's word is heard and God's name is lifted up.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and the Holy Spirit... Amen.