

Sermon “Climbing the Ladder?”
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Kirk of St James
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It is not uncommon for people to remember the past as being better than the present. Time and distance helps us smooth over the difficult memories and remember them as being easier than they were. I came across a quote while working on my MA that I always found humorous. It said, “Children nowadays are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannise their teachers.” While that sounds like a headline that could be ripped from today’s news it is actually attributed to Socrates—who lived from 470 BC to 399 BC. I wonder sometimes if things often feel worse in the present because we are living with the unknown. We do not know how things will go or what might happen, whereas we look at the past and we know.

That being said sometimes things in the past were “better.” While celebrating our 200th anniversary we have been finding photos of times when the Jr. and Sr. choir were massive, and we needed to build space for Sunday School, and the pews were indeed packed. Who would not want that to be the case again! Well, today in Haggai we have a similar situation. The small nation of Judah was finally allowed back in their land after decades of captivity in Babylon only to discover that things were much harder than they anticipated.

The prophet Haggai was one of only three postexilic prophets who arose after Persia became the dominant power in the ancient Near East. While some prophets have a long career Haggai’s is relatively short—in fact it can be narrowed down to a three-to-four month period between August to December, 520 BCE. While it was short it was significant.

For a nation of people that had been torn away from their homes and land, who had witnessed the destruction of everything they held dear, and then spent decades longing to return to this period of time should be the most exciting thing that could happen. What was once an impossible dream has suddenly become reality. As difficult as it was to imagine Cyrus, the emperor of Persia told them to return home and rebuild their temple. Can you imagine the jubilation? Can you picture this moment if it was Gaza or Ukraine today? How about the end of the World Wars? At the time it must have felt impossibly long, and the fear they would not end, just drag on indefinitely. Their unbearable agony and loss should now be at an end.

But instead of joy reality tempers their expectation. Their previous lives were now ruins. Life has changed. Many who witnessed firsthand the horror of their capture and captivity were gone. I read one estimate that said if you were over sixty-six you might have some memory of events, but you were most likely a child. For some Babylon and Captivity was the only life they

knew. The returnees are haunted by the idea of what was, and most likely the feeling that they could never live up to it. So, perhaps unsurprisingly they began to drift and focus on their own lives and homes. There was simply not the energy or the interest to keep up momentum on the temple.

I cannot imagine how hopeless things must have felt. Sometimes we have an idea of a line we need to get across for things to improve—we live for it. I am certain during World War One and Two the thought of the war ending was all anyone could hope for—then came the impossible reality of life after. Of cities destroyed, and people killed, and lack of jobs and food, the physical and emotional scars of war, they made it through, but there was still a long way to go.

When resources are scarce, when energy and motivation lag, when the tasks before you are monumental—how do you keep going? Well, for Judah they had the promises of Haggai. While his time as a prophet was short his message was eternal—“First of all, he declares that even if it is not quite obvious, God is with them, working with and through them...In addition, the prophet insists that God remembers God’s promises...not even the most difficult circumstances for the most arduous task will persuade God to stay away...For people who have been downtrodden for a long time, and whose hopes have all but disappeared, the assurance of such divine presence is quite uplifting, to say the least. Here is have a small remanent of a nation, a people with almost no resourcres except for themselves and their faith.” It is in the middle of this God speaks.

It was important for Judah to complete the temple. It is not that their own homes are not important, but the temple was what their lives and community centered around. It is what helped orient them in the world and guide their actions. Eventually the temple is not only completed, but with the help of Herod it was made into an even grander structure. This was the temple Jesus and his disciples would be looking at, when the disciples marvel over how incredible grand it is. Judah overcame their difficulties, the temple was rebuilt (and eventually torn down again by the Romans. It was never really about the building though—it was about the community.

We live in a world that can feel a lot like the one this small remenant from Judah faced. We live in a world where war still fails to be part of history. Where countries sometimes strive for power at the destruction of other. Where people face injustice and inequality. Where people are driven from their homes, and see destruction of the land. Through it all the promises of God stand. God is still with us, and God’s promises hold true. We give thanks for those who have worked to free others.