

First Things First
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: October 28, 2018

Scripture: Haggai 1; Psalm 34:1-8

I. Catherine and the CE committee have planned many fun activities for the children this afternoon for their Fall Fest. I will be driving the church bus this afternoon hoping to pick up several children to come and join the others in the fun.

Our Fall Fest reminded me of the story of a young girl who was not allowed to go to her church's picnic because she had misbehaved in church. Their church picnic was planned for the Saturday following Labor Day at a park near their church.

After her Sunday morning mischief, the young girl behaved so well over the course of that week that her mother relented and said she could go to the church picnic after all.

Surprisingly, the child's reaction was gloom and sadness. Her mother asked, "What's the matter? I thought you would be glad to go to the picnic." The little girl replied, "It's too late . . . I have already prayed for rain on Saturday."

This morning I will insist that it's never too late to do what's right if we keep first things first.

II. The book of the prophet Haggai in the OT has the same theme: keep the main thing the main thing.

The book of Haggai is the second shortest book in the OT. It was written to faithful people who would **say** that God must be first. But their **actions** showed how they had drifted away from this truth. They lived with misplaced priorities.

Haggai was a prophet sent to help God's people get back to the truth. Haggai spoke his message to Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after living in captivity in Babylon.

The army of Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple some 70 years earlier. When the Jews returned from exile they faced the daunting task of rebuilding.

The first persons to return cleared the charred debris and laid the foundation for a second temple. Their Samaritan neighbors offered to join in the work, but the Jews refused their help. Feeling put off, the Samaritans threatened the workers and sent emissaries to Persia to lobby against the Jews, bringing work to a halt.

As the years passed, more persons returned from exile in Babylon. Jerusalem came to life again, but not the Temple. Homes were built, shops opened, commerce returned, fields were planted, crops harvested, and a renewed sense of normalcy and hope for the future was established. But the Temple lay in ruins.

Israel got used to life without the Temple. The foundations were overgrown with weeds. They stood as a mute reminder of the Israelites' failure to take care of God's house.

About fifteen years into the rebuilding of their lives in Jerusalem, Haggai stepped in with his message: We must rebuild the Temple. Due to the detailed dates in this book, we know that Haggai delivered the message of chapter one from August 29-September 21, 520 B.C.

It was a message of priority. Put first things first. The Temple was the center for worshipping God. It represented the heart and soul of their communal worship.

Though we can worship God anywhere, a sanctuary gives us a defined spot where people will gather to honor God's name.

For the Temple to continue to lie in ruins, Haggai considered it an affront to the glory of God. It was a testimony of misplaced priorities.

III. Haggai's message was blunt and straightforward. Haggai

knew what the people thought about rebuilding the Temple: they wanted to push it off to some undetermined time in the future.

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has **not yet come** to rebuild the Lord’s house” (Haggai 1:2).

The people of Israel who had returned from exile had every intention to rebuild the Temple, but they hadn’t gotten around to it just yet. [Sounds like my desire to learn to play some chords on the guitar. I haven’t gotten around to it yet.]

The people of Israel were simply making excuses. The time is not right. I’ve got family obligations. When things settle down at work, then I can help out. They figured someone else would eventually take charge of the project of rebuilding the Temple and they would be off the hook.

It’s not as though the people of Israel were too busy to take care of their own homes. The homes they occupied when they returned from exile needed a great number of repairs, which they went about completing. Some of the repairs even included upgrades because they had seen what the homes in Babylon looked like.

“Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house [of the Lord] lies in ruins?’” (v.4)

When we think of paneled houses, we think of the wood-look wall covering that was popular in many basement spaces. When God’s word refers to the paneled houses in Israel, it likely means a home that is secure, weatherproof, “covered” in a special way, or simply “roofed” well.

The point is that the citizens had rebuilt their own homes so they were warm and dry. All the finishing touches had been applied to their own personal dwellings. No weeds were growing around their foundations.

Yet, the Temple remained in virtual ruins. The people said it was not quite the right time to fix the Temple.

Let me be perfectly clear. There is nothing wrong with a nice, warm, secure home. The homes that the returned exiles had worked so hard to restore were not the issue. Everyone needs a place to call home. Haggai was not delivering an indictment concerning their homes.

Haggai was prophesying about their attitude toward their Temple. If your homes are warm and dry, and you say it's still not the right time to repair the Temple, then when will it be the right time?

It is an indictment of misplaced priorities.

It was natural for the people of Israel to think of their own personal family concerns and wellbeing. We all do. The one thing you never have to teach any mentally healthy person to do is to care for oneself. Looking after my needs comes naturally to me.

The point of the rebuilding of the Temple is to provide that space where the people can commune together with God.

IV. The conditions in which the returned Israelites are living in are not extravagant. In fact, many outside the ruling class are truly suffering. Their harvests have been lousy, their food supply is strained, their water is limited, and inflation is causing their money to run out before the month ends (Haggai 1:5-7).

To top it off, without a proper Temple, there is no place they can go and worship God to find the peace and joy in life that is missing.

God commands, "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored" (1:8). God yearns to return to this people and to dwell in their

midst. The Temple is symbolic of that dwelling. If they rebuild the Temple, their efforts signal once again that they have turned their hearts toward the Lord.

The blessings they lack come through obedience to God. Centuries later, Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:33).

If we want to experience the blessing of a healthy relationship with God, the joy of knowing God’s favor, and the assurance of God’s forgiveness, we must put God first. Amen.