

A New Definition of Success
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: November 4, 2018

Scripture: Haggai 2; 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

I. On six different occasions, I have had the privilege of leading short-term mission trips, both here in the States and in the border region of Mexico.

Each mission trip involves hard work for the benefit of persons who do not have the resources or the physical strength to complete the task needed to secure or shore up their home.

There is a lot of enthusiasm on mission trips. The persons who raise money to travel someplace in order to help someone they don't know are generally good-natured folks. But sometimes even good-natured folks can get discouraged.

I remember vividly one trip to Wayne County, West Virginia. There were several teenage boys assigned to work with me to paint on a new aluminum reflective roof on a mobile home trailer.

On the first day, everyone was fired up! On the second day of painting on a hot, metal roof, with thick paint that ruins clothing, the enthusiasm was waning.

It took us about four days to fill in the cracks, sufficiently coat the roof, and clean up from our work. That fourth day of hot, humid work was like pulling teeth. The sense of excitement from day one was gone. But we did finish our work.

II. When the initial Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, they were excited about rebuilding the temple. Shortly after their return to Jerusalem, they cleared away the charred debris from the former temple.

They built the foundation for the new temple. In the OT book of Ezra, we read that a big celebration took place after the completion of the new foundation (Ezra 3:11-13).

Imagine the picture in the Barberton Herald when the Mayor and other dignitaries have on ill-fitting hard-hats as they scoop out ceremonial shovels-full of dirt. They are celebrating what is to come. That's the picture here in Jerusalem just a short time after returning from exile.

The new temple foundation is set. Jerusalem and their faith in God are rising from the ashes of defeat.

During the celebration, the young people shouted for joy. Look what we have done for the Lord, they said. But many of the elderly priests and leaders cried. And these were not tears of joy.

Many of the elderly exiles who remembered the grandeur of Solomon's temple cried out loud. They were sad that the new temple might not be as dazzling and opulent as the former temple. They cried because they believed their efforts would amount to a drab little temple, which could never reflect the glory of God.

III. There were persons in Haggai's day who looked back longingly to the past, yet refused to see the work of God in the present. The young people were right to celebrate the laying of the foundation for the new temple.

They were building a temple that would be a place of worship and community gathering for centuries to come. So what if it wasn't an exact duplicate of Solomon's temple. It was still going to be a temple. The new temple would be a success.

I think we may stumble at times trying to carry the weight of the past with us today. There are persons today who look longingly at the past, yet fail to see God at work in the present.

On this corner of 6th and West Park we are obeying God today. We are caring for others. We are meeting needs. We are worshipping in joy and reverence today. Thanks be to God.

IV. The fascinating point of this display of emotion (the young were celebrating the new temple foundation, while the elderly were mourning the former temple that was gone forever) is that God knew what the elders in Haggai's day were thinking.

They were thinking that this new temple is going to be a shoddy place of worship. The neighboring countries won't be awed by its grandeur; when our relatives visit from out-of-town, they won't be impressed like they would have been in Solomon's day; and God won't be pleased with our paltry results.

Inspired by God to speak, Haggai delivered this message. "I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. (God is speaking of the new temple.) The silver is mine, and the gold is mine. The latter splendor of **this house** shall be greater than the former; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts" (Haggai 2:7,8).

In other words, stop crying. Quit looking back to the days of yore when your selective memory has decided everything back then was perfect. It wasn't perfect back then.

In fact, said God, the new temple will be more impressive than the former one. You have my word on it.

V. In Haggai chapter 2, the foundation sat unfinished for fifteen years. As I recounted from my mission trip experiences, sometimes the initial enthusiasm wanes. The actual work is taxing and tedious, long and tiresome.

I found two quotes from the very quotable Thomas Edison that apply here: "Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration"; and, "We often miss opportunity because it's dressed in overalls and looks like work."

It is easy to become discouraged when delays happen, when your image of what you think should happen, doesn't happen.

If the people of Haggai's day were viewing success from the short range, they would have been very discouraged. With God, a thousand years is as a day. True success will be measured in the light of eternity, not in our lifetimes.

We need to keep this in mind as we serve the Lord and labor for the Lord. The harvest is at the end of the age, not at the end of this hour. God's timing is not our timing.

As Patti read for us from 1 Corinthians, "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it" (3:10).

We are not responsible to God for the eventual outcome of our efforts. But we must answer for the efforts we expended.

God tells the people in Haggai's day to be obedient, to do the work God asks of them, and leave the results up to God.

The same message is spoken to each of us. Don't be discouraged as you serve the Lord. Our job is to be obedient, and God will take care of the rest.

Conclusion

After many years of hardship and danger in the heart of Africa, David Livingstone received an honorary doctorate from the University of Glasgow. On that occasion, he was asked, "Would you tell us what supported you through all the years of exile among people whose language you could hardly understand and whose attitude toward you was uncertain and often hostile?"

Livingstone replied, "My support I found in this: 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.' On those words I staked everything and they never failed." God is with us as we are obedient. Thanks be to God for his work among us today. Amen.