

THE PROBLEM WITH PANELED HOUSES

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Text: Haggai 1:1–11

This is only my second sermon in our “Command to Preach” series, which has been delightful and a good kind of challenge, and, I will admit, it has become a bit of a competition between us preachers. Who will draw the passage no one really wants? Who will get an old favorite beckoning a new perspective? And who is going to get the most obscure submission? Well, I think I may have won that particular category. Today’s text is from Haggai—anyone know anything about Haggai? Called a minor prophet, Haggai falls within those short little books at the end of the Hebrew Testament. Only two chapters long and covering very little real estate in terms of pages, Haggai is one of the books in which you have to flip through the pages multiple times in order to find it. Blink and you’ll miss it. And in 30 years of preaching, I can honestly admit I have never expounded on any verses from Haggai. There truly is a first time for everything.

Richard Spratt submitted the first 11 verses from the first chapter of Haggai with these thoughts and questions: “What is the meaning of this text? As a young adult I often heard elders reference God blowing on money that was lost or mismanaged by an individual or group. Is this about equity or the lack of equity? Capitalism? [These verses do] not seem to apply to the one percent population as their wealth continues to grow. What is their role in ending homelessness? Poverty? How do we care for the whole community? [And finally,] will resolving community problems ever come to pass?”

Now that’s a lot to tackle in one sermon. Richard, I hope I don’t disappoint you. I approached this text within the context of it being our first time gathered in the sanctuary for a Sunday morning worship service in 20 months. 20 months! And, like all of you, I hold a lot of emotion about this . . . especially because I know there are many who are not yet ready to join us in person—each decision these days seems weightier than it did 20 months ago. Therefore, our virtual community remains vibrant as does our understanding that we must reframe community to include all those connected to Plymouth who are not here with us in the sanctuary. And today is All Saints’ Sunday, a tender day for many of us as we recall and give thanks for those in our lives we love who are no longer living.

Knowing just how many layers of feeling shape this particular day, I invite you to take a deep breath and let the words of this challenging text fall upon you, many of you hearing them for the very first time. How do these words speak to you today?

Haggai 1:1–11

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house. 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 lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the Lord of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors.

Let us pray:

May these words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Divine One. You have held us together in our scattered state and we know that will never cease. Open our minds and hearts to new understandings. Amen.

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How does it feel to be here?

We have waited so long for this . . . and yet—we have not arrived at where we would hope to be. For just as I wonder how each of you feels at this time, I am also immensely tender hearted for all of you who are watching either in this moment or in one to come, perhaps filled with a longing to be here, too, but for so many reasons know it does not yet feel safe. Our community continues to exist in a scattered state, not yet whole, or, more accurately, this pandemic has forced us to reframe our understanding of community and what it means to feel “a part of” rather than “left out”. And on this All Saints’ Sunday, we are aware of our great cloud of witnesses—not just the 36 we pay tribute to through our prayers and the lighting of candles but all those other saints who have come before us in this hallowed space, making Plymouth what it is today. Today is one of the many days in our lives in which we hold joy and sorrow in the palm of one hand, coming together in gratitude and grief, intensely aware that we can not go back to what was before March of 2020, that “normal” is no longer relevant, and that our future remains uncertain. I think we have a lot in common with the Israelites to whom Haggai delivered his challenge.

Haggai prophesied during a four-month period in 520 BCE. Sixty-six years earlier in 586 BCE, Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, including the Temple. The destruction of Jerusalem led to the Israelites being held captive in Babylonia. In 539 BCE, the Persian Emperor Cyrus overtook Babylon and Israel became a province of Persia. Cyrus did not maintain the Babylonian practice of deporting conquered people and forcing them to live outside their homeland, so he allowed the exiled to return to Jerusalem. Initially upon a homeland return, there were great efforts toward the rebuilding of the Temple, chronicled in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. And then, efforts stalled. Perhaps the people had tired of that work, or perhaps they were preoccupied getting their personal lives and properties reestablished, tending their own exiled trauma while also accumulating things they had long lived without. The rebuilding of the Temple—not only a place to worship but also the center gathering place for community and relationship—had stopped. Up steps Haggai in 520 BCE to demand a restart.

For some, the isolation of the pandemic has felt like exile. For others, it has been respite. Through it all, we have been challenged to examine our priorities, to re-understand the significance of community and to reframe our notion of church.

Haggai understood the importance of place. Even though his words are harsh, they are also meant to motivate, and to get people to evaluate their values. Having not had a real home for the years spent in exile, of course people would want to spend so much time, money, and energy on their paneled houses. We all yearn to know security, and to relish a place to belong. Yet we also know that too much emphasis on self decreases connection to the other. The paneled houses mentioned in this text probably had walls

and ceilings covered with cedar wood. Such decoration was a sign of prosperity in a land where wood was scarce. The people were spending freely on their own homes while neglecting both the source of community (God) and the community itself—those who gather in the Temple to praise and to pray and to also share joy and sorrow, resource and responsibility. Yes, a temple is built to honor God, just like this sanctuary, but without the presence of the people to give it life, it remains an empty vessel.

The prophet speaks a word to both inflame and agitate:

Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

The problem with paneled houses is that while they provide safety and security because they keep others out, they become the barrier to the sanctuary so many of us seek, leaving us unfulfilled and desperate to find both connection and meaning. Community is where true sanctuary is found . . . knowing there is a place for us along with others and in solidarity we come together to reunite, to restore, and to respond.

I have served with you for four-and-a-half years. And in that time, I have heard many of you say that Plymouth Congregational Church is on the cusp of something—something new, a different way of being church, a community ripe with possibility, a system ready for a paradigm shift. The unspoken in those proclamations is that something is holding us back—a too tight tether to tradition or a fear of the future, perhaps. This is not to discount the rich history of faith and learning and study and social outreach that has occurred because of these walls, guided by the ancestors we grieve anew on this day. But never more than right now, in this precious yet precarious moment in our communal life is this more true: We are on the edge of something new. We cannot have lived through what we have just endured in order for things to stay the same. Trying to recreate that which made us church before March of 2020 will both disappoint and discourage us. Haggai's call to the Israelites is his call to us . . . the time is now to build. The time is now to stretch into a new way of community. The time is now to be the church we have only dreamt of before. In order to do this, we must leave our paneled houses—literally and figuratively—and trust that God holds the future, inviting us into community we have only dared to imagine.

This text led me down a path that did not include direct answers to many of Richard's queries. But his final two questions swirl in my heart as I consider what the future holds:

How do we care for the whole community? By being a church willing to put the needs of others before our own desires. Please prayerfully consider this, my friends, as we press onward in the midst of this pandemic, taking great care to make decisions regarding safety and inclusion. Putting the needs of others impacts our decisions and outreach far beyond the complexities of a pandemic, and the goal here is to leave our insular paneled house to take risk and responsibility for the well-being of our neighbors.

And: Will resolving community problems ever come to pass? The scope of societal maladies is so wide and there are many things over which we have little control. So why not become the kind of community—spiritual community—that models to the world a different way of engagement, of problem solving, of loving one another far beyond the walls of this paneled house?

Never before in my three decades of ministry have I felt so strongly that the church is being called to build something new. Our Stewardship Committee has asked us to consider how we move forward to Cultivate Faith, Nurture Connection and Amplify Love. Haggai's charge to the beleaguered Israelites is now our contemporary commission.

What kind of temple will we build, Plymouth? What Church will we be?

Amen.