

# Trinity United Methodist Church

November 10, 2019

“Take Courage”

Pastor Dan Elmore

## Scripture: Haggai 1:15b-2:9

In the second year of King Darius, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”

## Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So around this time of year, with Thanksgiving and Christmas quickly approaching, we tend to start waxing nostalgic, thinking of yesteryears and memories of these holidays gone by. And we often do so by lamenting the status quo. So many times over the last couple of weeks I’ve seen on social media, over and over and over and over, the likes of this question, “Remember when stores started playing Christmas music *after* Thanksgiving?” Or, “Remember when you could get Black Friday deals *only*

on Black Friday, and you had to stand in line all night to get them, and a horde of people to get to the front door to get them? Oh, those were the days!” And indeed, we often long for a time, though, when things were *as they were*. As they *should be*, at least according to us, at least in our minds. You’ll hear people say that they long for times when everything seemed simpler, when we remember that what we remember is more comfortable than what we currently face. Simpler and more comfortable.

Why do we long for these things? Because of the common human emotion and experience called anxiety. Anxiety is a fact of life, and it plays out in so many different ways, especially giving rise to fear.

So our Scripture today is found in a book from which we don’t often read, the prophet Haggai, one of the so-called minor prophets, because Haggai is so short that it’s only two pages long in one of my Bibles. But to understand any of the prophets, you have to understand and know at least a little bit of history, so don’t let your eyes glaze over too much. This’ll be quick and painless, I promise.

You have to know about the exile. When the Babylonians in 586 B.C. sacked Jerusalem and they conquered what was left of Israel, and they took nearly everybody back to what is for us modern-day Iraq in exile. Soon enough the Babylonian empire was conquered by the Persians, and King Cyrus of the Persians then decreed that hey, the Jews that were living in exile would actually be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. And so in 538 B.C., almost 50 years later, that first group returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel and set to work, among their first tasks, rebuilding the temple. The temple, for Jews and for Judaism, is literally God’s house. Literally, where God dwelt. In the Holy of Holies is literally, “where God sat.” So to rebuild this house for God meant that God would then once again dwell among His people. And so they wanted, of course – I mean, if you’re building a house for God, you want it to be better than your house, right? You want it to be the best house possible, and that’s how they set about doing this. Only one problem: While there were many who were overjoyed at this prospect of just being able to rebuild God’s house, there were some who longed for the time of the first temple, from what they remembered of that first temple, long ago in the glory days of Jerusalem. They looked to the construction, as it was happening, of this second temple, and it just didn’t compare with the glory that they remembered from the former temple.

The Lord names it. He speaks through the prophet Haggai and He asks, “Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Doesn’t look like much, does it?” Put yourself in their shoes. You were first excited about this fantastic new opportunity to return to the homeland, to return to the land of your ancestors, to return to what’s comfortable and what you know, what you’ve been told about. To that which should bring comfort. But now that they’re there, the situation is at

least a little bit disappointing, and for some it's flat-out devastating. Anxiety and fear would be on the rise. What's become of us, that we can't rebuild like we used to be? What on earth should we do? Did we really come all this way for *this*?

And yet nearly an entire generation has passed from the exile to this moment that we read about. And therefore the only ones who were actually able to remember the so-called former glory days were those recalling their memories from their childhood, of what they *thought* they remembered.

Often that's the way nostalgia works. We bring up these memories from our childhood. When I get nostalgic about Thanksgiving, I remember going to my Mema's house and getting to sit with my cousins at the kids' table and Mema's excellent cooking that she did, and *that's* Thanksgiving still, for me. But often what we remember from our childhoods as the glory days typically tends to be grander and more special than they were in reality.

Have you ever gone back and visited a place that as a kid you thought was absolutely huge? Maybe it was your grandparents' back yard, maybe it was your grandparents' house. For me, it was the sanctuary at my home church. That sanctuary was absolutely a huge room to me as a kid. But then you go back and you visit that space as an adult, and you realize, wow...this is pretty disappointing. It's not big at all. And it is disappointing, isn't it?

It's the same with those who might remember that first temple. There's very few of them left. Yet the few, as they lament the glory days of the past and they get negative about the rebuilding of the present, those few could spoil the entire endeavor to rebuild. Because negativity is contagious. It spreads like a virus. It's a cancer that eats away at any forward progress that might be made.

And so the word of the Lord comes to the people through the prophet Haggai, reminding them that people of faith are not meant to be merely people of nostalgia, dwelling on the past or their preferences for what should be. "Be strong," God says. "Take courage, and get to work." Why? "For I am with you," declares the Lord Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, and my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear."

The prophet goes on to speak of apocalyptic imagery where the Lord will one day have His way in the world. And of this temple they're rebuilding, that they're so worried about, the Lord says, "this temple is going to end up far better than it started out," in the words of The Message. "A glorious beginning, but an even more glorious finish. A place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness." God's reminding them that, "you think the past was so great – wait till you see the future."

God is saying that when we focus on our own feeble efforts or those of others, it's easy to become discouraged. Financially, we pay off one bill, and doggone, three more come due. Relationally, we might get one relationship going better and another falls apart. Healthwise, we get one aspect of our body healed up, and something else, somewhere else in our body goes haywire. We lose loved ones when we'd gladly put ourselves in their place.

And this might not be you right now. You might be thinking, "life is going just grand right now." Well, I can guarantee you that there is something in your life right now that is raising your anxiety. That when you look upon that aspect of your life or the life of a loved one, you don't like what you see. It makes you uncomfortable, uneasy, anxious, fearful. What on earth can be done?

In the church as a whole, across America, there is much that we don't like what we see. Some churches and pastors cozying up too closely to politics on both sides of the aisle. Some churches not standing for the truth of Scripture, however we interpret that. Some not being welcoming enough of all people. So many in our world around us not taking the church seriously enough, and an increasing number of people flat-out rejecting the church.

We are not immune to these anxiety-inducing trends in the United Methodist Church, nor here at Trinity United Methodist Church. We long for the glory days by lamenting the status quo in the present. We scrutinize our own feeble efforts or those of others. You might have noticed that our worship attendance overall has decreased. So has our giving. We've lost many members due to death, and some by decision to join with another church. These things and more make us uncomfortable, uneasy, anxious, fearful. What can be done?

Maybe we first need to hear the word of the Lord again through the prophet Haggai. "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now, *now*, be strong," declares the Lord Almighty. "Be strong, all you people, and work, for I am with you," declares the Lord Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, and my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear."

As a Washington, D.C. sports fan, I find that there is a tale of two teams in and around our nation's capital right now. One of those teams does nothing but point the fingers of blame at each other. Is it the players' fault? Is it the coach's fault? Is it the front office's fault? Is it the owner's fault (yes, it's the owner's fault)? But they point fingers of blame at each other all the time, and the Washington Redskins, as a result, *cannot win a game*. They barely beat the Miami Dolphins, of all teams. The results of which is this toxic culture, as a team, of doing nothing but shifting blame from one to the other.

Gruden was even quoted as, “Hey, what’s your plan for quarterback?” “We don’t even have a plan at quarterback.”

On the other side of the Potomac, there’s another team. A team that just won the World Series. And how did they do so? Here’s what one of their star players had to say.

**Sports Announcer:** You’ve been doused in champagne, and now you’ve had a chance to dry off and let the reality sink in that you all go to Houston and win 6 and win 7 and you’re champions of the world. As it settles in, what does that represent in your mind?

**Anthony Rendon/Washington Nationals:** Resilience, I guess. We just never gave up, no matter how many times we were facing elimination games or we were about to get traded or people were about to get fired. We just kept on going.

**Announcer:** You, I think, represent that. I joked with Ryan Zimmerman that your resting heart rate is 4, and when you get excited it’s 12. How are you able to at least project to the world, total peace and calm regardless of the situation?

**Anthony Rendon:** Man, I think I understand that there’s bigger things going on in this world, and my Savior, Jesus Christ, gives me that patience and that slow heart rate. It’s better than, you know, taking bullets for your country on the other side of the world. This should be a breeze for us.

**Announcer:** Well, that’s well framed. I mean, look, my job, what we do, is just a game. But yet, it’s the most important game that can be played in your sport. And when your team shows this kind of resilience and shows this kind of fight and is able to get off the deck time and time again, how much more satisfying does that make the accomplishment?

**Anthony Rendon:** Oh, it makes it so much better. Especially the fact when people had just written us off, where we had 0.1% chance to make the playoffs or whatever the number was – we just kept going out there, believing in ourselves, ‘cause that’s all that we had. We had nothing to lose except for that 0.1% percent chance or whatever it might have been.

**Announcer:** See, I understand analytics, but I think they dismissed the fact that human beings play these sports, with a heartbeat, which might be slow, but you’ve still got to play the games on the field. I felt like it could have been you, it could have been Soto, it could have been Stras that was the MVP. Is that maybe the best metaphor for your group, that on any given day, it was any different guy? And that wasn’t cliché. I mean, over and over again, it was any of the 25 since June, wasn’t it?

**Anthony Rendon:** Yeah, definitely. I mean, there was a lot of times where we had to pick up our starter pitching. There was a lot of times where our pitching had to pick up our hitting. And there was a lot of times where we had to pick up our bullpen, you know, when the first half of the order wasn't hitting and the second half of the order picked us up. So we've been dealing with this throughout the longevity of the whole year, and then it didn't change for us in the postseason.

**Pastor:** To what does Anthony Rendon attribute their success? His faith in Jesus Christ and believing in each other, as they rolled up their sleeves time and time again and worked together.

Which team are we going to be on? I hope we're on Team Jesus. But are we going to be the team that looks back to the past with nostalgia, wishing for what was? Or are we going to be the team that believes in the future that God holds in the palm of His hand, in our faith in Jesus Christ and our belief in each other to roll up our sleeves and keep working together?

One of the first and most important ways in which we do so is in prayer. And if you turn to page 5 in your bulletin, you will see there at the bottom of page 5, you will see that next Sunday after this service, don't skedaddle out of here, but instead join us outside the building, as we are going to literally encircle our church building in prayer. And we're going to do our best to join hands to circle the entire building. We're going to face inward and pray for our church, and then we're going to turn around and we're going to face outward and we're going to pray for our community around us. And so I hope that you will plan to join us. Take a look around you, see who's not here and make sure you invite them to join us for that next week after this service.

And then right above that you'll see the paragraph about our 24-hour Day of Prayer vigil that we have at the beginning of Advent every year. So it's another opportunity work together in prayer, lifting each other up, our church up, the concerns that we carry. There'll be opportunity where you can write down your prayer requests and leave them for other people to pray and so forth. So a sign-up sheet is available outside the FAC. Get the good time slots before all that's left is like 2 and 3 a.m. Or, if you're a night owl, certainly sign up for 2 and 3 a.m., definitely! Debbie says please!

I lift these to you as ways in which we can continue the fight together as Team Jesus, as individuals, as families, and as Trinity United Methodist Church together. Thanks be to God. Amen.