

Sermon Reading: Haggai 1:1-11

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak the high priest:

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.’”

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. ⁹ “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

Sermon Theme: Giving to God Doesn’t Make a Bit of Sense

We like it when things make sense. We like it when life adds up as easily as $1+1 = 2$ ¹ and when life works out the way we expect. But it doesn’t take a child long in their young lives to learn the hard lesson that life doesn’t always make sense. They stand in disbelief and shock when something just isn’t fair because it doesn’t make sense! And as we continue through life, more of life does not make sense. A young girl grows up in a Christian home with a loving, caring, supporting family but she ends up getting hooked on drugs all-but-ruining her life. It doesn’t make sense. He lives a healthy life, exercises, eats all the right things, only to be diagnosed with cancer. How does that make sense? A good hardworking woman, loving wife, and caring mother after twenty years of marriage decides she doesn’t want to do it anymore and walks out on her family. Really? It doesn’t make sense.

¹ This and other illustrations are borrowed from WELS Congregation Resources with *10-for-10*

We would like life to make more sense. We like to think that there is a law of nature, some type of breakthrough, or someone is just going to figure it out to make things make sense. But we know better. The more we look at life, the more it doesn't make sense.

At least some of the Old Testament Israelites probably felt that way as they watched their homes go up in flames and the walls of their beloved temple and city come tumbling down. *Why is this happening to me?* It didn't make sense as they looked back at that smoldering heap they once called home and were carted off to live in Babylon far from home and a strange land. What was their big crime besides living in that city and being part of the people, the Israelites?

70 years later, a new king in the land, and they hear they can go back to Israel. And when some of them do, they are eager to get to work. Because this makes sense; God had fulfilled his promise to bring them home. The walls of Jerusalem begin to take form again. The altar is rebuilt on the Temple Mount. Plans are put into place to dig down and lay the foundation so a brand-new Temple would be rebuilt. Things are going well. It was an exciting time!

But you know how it goes. Excitement runs out and interest in the project goes with it. Some maybe saw how they were spending so much time and resources on the temple stuff and not enough at home on their stuff. That didn't seem to make as much sense. Questions like, *"Why aren't you home more? Shouldn't you be taking care of this stuff at home?"* maybe came to mind. So they turned their attention, their time, and their resources on taking care of their homes. They probably figured that once they finished with this stuff at home, once they had more of an abundance, the more they could do later on down the road. And so they did what made sense. But the "later" that they were waiting to show up, never did and the work stopped on God's house for about 14-15 years.

What they did, made sense—humanly speaking. Haggai's message does not. **"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"**⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: **"Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."**⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: **"Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,"** says the LORD. ⁹ **"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?"** declares the LORD Almighty. **"Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands."**

The Israelites were preaching a sermon about personal priorities with their paneled houses and procrastination with God's house: self-first. God-second. Giving to God first doesn't make a bit of sense.

It's not too difficult to see ourselves in those Israelites of the Old Testament. If you give your money away, that means you are going to have less money for *x*, *y*, and *z*. That makes sense. If I give my time, talents, and treasures away, that means I have less for myself, what I like to do, my hobbies. If I prioritize the work of the Lord with Firstfruit giving, that means every other area in my life is going to suffer, right? Even the tax write-off that you get for offerings—when comparing in the grand scheme of things—is not that good of an incentive for the majority.

Humanly speaking, giving doesn't make a bit of sense. It's true. It is. It's also true, that the default mode for my sinful nature is to keep stuff, store stuff, stockpile more stuff, even hoard stuff as we look out for #1 me (*WELS Resources*). We say that we are preparing just in case something happens. We say that we want to make sure that we can take care of ourselves and do what's best for our families. We say we are planning for the future. But as they say, you can dress up a pig as much as you want; it's still a pig. You can dress up selfishness with as many excuses and reasons as you want; it's still being selfish. God says, "Give careful thought to your ways." He's telling you and me, "Consider where your heart is set on." Where are your priorities?

Notice again how Haggai's sermon takes the Israelites' sermon of excuses and turns it around on them: **You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat and drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.** It might make us uncomfortable but it's the truth: the people had less because they gave little. And it's God himself who is doing it with one drought, one holey purse at a time. The same God who takes a boy's snack lunch and feeds 5000 people, is the God who can insure that a stockpile of stuff isn't able to make ends meet but blows it away (*WELS Resources*).

We are going to try something here: running Haggai's ideas through some imaginary prayers:²

"Dear Lord, thank you for the lowest unemployment rate in America since 1969, while we consider cutting back on ministry. Amen." *"Dear Lord, thank you for providing all that I need for my daily life, while there's a slight panic whenever the financial statement for church comes out. Amen."* *"Dear Lord, thank you for the 4% growth in America's economy. Now if only Pastor lands these next money sermons that would be great, because I know that I'm not going to give anything more no matter what the Bible says about firstfruits giving. Amen."*

² Idea from *WELS Resources*; actual prayers have been changed.

Yeah, those don't sound right, do they? But in a not-so-subtle way, we too preach sermons with our paneled houses and our procrastination of the God's house and work: Giving to God first doesn't make a bit of sense.

I find it interesting: we often hear comments about how everything is getting so expensive today. Everything costs more money due to inflation and a host of other reasons. But we keep on buying those things, we keep willingly spending the money, we find ways to make it work when we decide it's needed. But then offerings remain flat. And really, that makes sense—only if God isn't in first place in our hearts.

We expect a full-service ministry with church, school, and preschool. But can we realistically expect them to do that if the paneling of our homes remains first priority? Is the reason why we don't like sermons and services around stewardship because we don't like to talk about money or is it because you know that you have not always been honest with yourself with your giving? Are you giving from a heart that puts God first or a heart that holds back or gives out of a feeling of obligation?

We have received a Christian ministry built on the sacrifice of parents and grandparents. Are we willing to prioritize the Lord's work in order to pass them on to the next generations to come? I'm not practicing any scare tactics or fear-mongering this morning. I'm not engaging in a shallow sentimental cheerleading session of "do it for the children and little ones!" It's the simple truth: **You get the ministry that you are willing to give for.** Next year's plan for how we are going to continue to carry out the Lord's work in our church, our school, our preschool will be based on how well we give as a family of believers—each and every one of us. We can only minister with what God's people give.

After Haggai's stern message, the Israelites give; they even give confidently. Why? Because they believed in a God who gave himself completely for us! Do you think that God let these people who gave to the temple starve and freeze at home? This is the same God who promises that when we give our firstfruits to him, he will open up the floodgates of heaven so that we won't be able to store it all (Malachi 3:10)—you will never out-give God.

The truth is: it's not our giving that doesn't make sense. It's God's giving that makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. He gives to us his first—Jesus—his best—his Son—without holding anything back from you. Jesus decides to leave the perfect glory and light of heaven to live in this gloomy, dark world filled with sinful people and everything stained to the core with sin and evil. He who is the fullness of God takes on flesh and subjects himself to our weaknesses, our temptations, our struggles, our difficulties. That doesn't make any sense. But Jesus willingly comes to go to die on the cross where He who is sinless becomes sin for us so that we might be right with God. The selfless dies for the selfish. The lover of all gives up his life for those preoccupied with loving ourselves. Jesus gives himself fully, suffering the punishment for every

sin, not holding anything back, so that you and I are not treated as our selfish sins and sinful priorities deserve.

We could never pay him back, give enough, set aside enough for his perfect selfless sacrifice. But do not worry, Jesus doesn't want you to try to either. Jesus gives freely without expectation or demand in return. That doesn't make sense. But that's grace! Grace is not earned, it's freely given. Grace is not deserved; but it's given without ulterior motives or hidden agendas. Grace isn't forced on you, it's poured out for you. It was poured into your hearts when the water of baptism was poured on your head. It's poured into your ears and on your heart when you hear, "Your sins are forgiven." You receive it when you take and eat, take and drink at the Lord's Supper the body and blood given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

And what do we do? Think about when someone gives you a gift that you weren't expecting, it didn't make any sense, and you know the love that is tied with the gift—your heart just opens up with this desire to return the love. You know they don't want you to do anything; you know that they aren't expecting anything in return—even a thank you card! But you still do something because their love motivates you to share love as well. That's what God's grace does for us. As we grow in the love God gives with his grace and forgiveness of sins, faith desires to show love in return. And how we do that is with our offerings, how we use our time, how we use our talents in the service of the Lord first. God is not concerned about the exact amount of dollars, cents, the hours and minutes, how much energy is used. He's looking at your heart that joyfully and thankfully gives to him first. A heart that was washed of every sin with the blood of his Son Jesus. A heart that was set apart and created new by the Holy Spirit in baptism. A heart of his own child. No, giving doesn't make sense; but we lean not on our own understanding and trust God who gave his First and Best in Jesus. Your God is faithful. Bank on his promises. Amen.