

Sermon Reading: Haggai 1:2-14

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.”

¹² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you,” declares the LORD. ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God.

Sermon Theme: Give Careful Thought to Your Ways

You may have heard it said before, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” One way to understand this is that that no matter how good and well-meaning the intention may be, unless you do it, just the intention is pretty much worthless. And we’ve all been there before. You had the intention to take the garbage out like you were asked, but it simply slips your mind. You had meant to give that person a call, but then the reminder you wrote yourself was lost in the shuffle of papers. You had every intention of making it, but you realized the schedule just would not allow it. Life happens and we can’t really fault anyone. But, you still didn’t make it. That phone call never was made. The garbage either wasn’t taken out or someone else had to do it. Just having the intention didn’t help anyone or anything. For things like taking out the garbage, not following through with the intention can seem rather harmless. But when it comes to following God’s will, he’s not satisfied with your best intentions. He expects you to follow through.

We see this in the reading from Haggai. The people of Judah had spent 70 years in Babylon in captivity because of their disobedience to God's command. But as God had promised, the people were allowed to come home. When they came back, one of their first orders of business was to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed. And so they begin with building a new altar on the foundation of the old so they can resume their worship life as soon as possible. Even when they are afraid of the other nations around them and those people actively work to discourage and frustrate their plans, the Jews keep working.

But after a while, the discouragement becomes too much. The opposition is too great. The desire to keep working dies out and eventually the work on the temple stops. I'm sure the first few years there were plenty of comments like, "We really need to finish. Someone should get going on that work. It needs to get done." I'm sure the leaders had every intention; I'm sure the people meant to get back to it eventually. But as the years went by, they probably just got used to the sight and thought maybe this is how it's supposed to be. It was good enough—they had the altar to make the sacrifices; they could get by. So for about 14-15 years nothing happens.

When we look at our church, our school, our daily lives we can see plenty of instances that look like that from Haggai. God blesses you in some shape or form—a gift is given, a sickness is healed, someone you love feels better, you receive good news—or you simply see there's a need and want to do something, so we have this desire to do the Lord's work. But then something comes up. Time runs out, life gets busy, finances aren't there. Frustrations and discouragement wears us down to the point of wondering, "Why should I?"

How many different projects at church are started but then stop because of discouragement from other people or even our own members not supporting it? How many different things at school—an extension of this church—is whatever we can do to get by? How often do we have the intention to do better, we see the opportunity to do more, but then it stops because of fear of budget, other people, or because we don't like change?

When we take an honest look at our personal lives we see much the same thing. It might be the intention to give more in offering or it's the intention to volunteer more of your time and talents for different church things. It may be the intention to study your Bible or attending Bible class. You might have the intention of inviting someone to church or you want to be more regular in worship. It might be a struggle with a pet sin and your heart-felt intention to not fall into it again. It may be your intention to be a better parent, a better spouse, a better child, a better friend. But then life happens. Time runs short. The finances aren't there. Your energy level and motivation is missing. Discouragement and frustration come in all sorts of forms. Whatever might have been the cause, those well-felt intentions and plans go nowhere.

For the Jews in Haggai's day they were saying: "**The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.**" Their claim sounds legitimate and thought out: "It just isn't the right time. We are just waiting to make sure that when we get back into it nothing is going to get in our way and stop us."

But, the Lord knows the truth: "**Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?**" In other words: "Look at how nice your homes are! You

had plenty of time to take care of that. You can't tell me it's a time problem; you can't tell me it's a money problem. The reality is you are quick to run back to your own homes to take care of your personal comforts, take care of your own business. But when it comes to my house, giving glory to me, the Lord, you leave it like a pile of waste." No, it wasn't a time problem or anything else; it was a heart problem. Yes, they had their altar where they burnt offerings and worshipped God. But their hearts were far from him. Instead, of having no other gods, they worshipped the most convenient and easy god to follow: themselves.

The Word of the Lord now comes to you: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" God has so richly blessed us. Even if we don't have as much stuff or things as someone else, that's not what God is comparing you to. He's looking at the blessings that he has given to you. You think of the mini-computers we have as cell-phones that adults and children walk around with in our pockets. You think of the car that you drive to get to where you need to go. You look at your closets, your dresser drawers, and the clothes that you have to choose from. When we go looking for food in the pantry because we are hungry, we might say there's nothing in here, but we know the truth. You think about the talents that God has given to you; the drive that is within you to get something done when you put your mind to it and the ability actually do it. There's the blessing of the period of time and place where we have relative peace to spread the Gospel. Don't forget the time that God has given to you live on this earth.

But then like the people in Haggai we seem to say: the time has not yet come. Our attitudes look like: "Once God gives more, then I will give more. Once I have more time, then I will be able to. It's just not a good for me right to do that for the Lord, it's not the right time to give up that sin. There's time later when I want to; just not right now." You may not say it out loud, but our actions say something differently.

No, we may not have the same type of resources as the next guy, but God has blessed you. When it comes to time, we still have the amount of time during the day as everyone else. It's been the same amount since Creation. Yes, some have different and maybe more responsibilities. But everyone is busy. It's not a time or busy problem; it's not a finance or possessions problem. It's a heart problem.

Give careful thought to your ways, the Lord says. The people of Judah thought it was in their best interest to look out for themselves. They planted much. They kept busy. They worked hard. But it was never enough. It seemed like their money fell right out of their pockets. They harvested little. They found little enjoyment and satisfaction in their work.

We can easily fall into the same idea that I need to take care of myself first before I follow God's will and put him first in my life. We fear what the future holds because we just don't know how it's going to work out; we fear that we aren't going to have enough. We believe that we are going to lacking in some way, missing out on some experiences, or God is holding back on us. We love to think that we know best; we love ourselves, or personal comforts, our wants. But what we fail to see is that God expects us to always put him first. He's not going to settle for second place. The Lord isn't satisfied with your leftover time, energy, or money. He withheld his blessing from the people of Judah so that they would wake up and give careful thought to their ways. He disciplines us in different ways too.

He does this, not to punish his people, but because he desires to bless you. He wants you to see how foolish this line of thinking is and to give careful thought on where your heart is set. So he encourages the Jews: the time is now—there is no better time than the present—to go up, get the trees, and build his temple. Oh, it was going to be hard, expensive, time-exhausting work. But he assures the people when they do it: “I will take pleasure in it and be honored.” There is nothing greater in heaven or on earth than to please God.

He tells you and me: there’s work to be done right now. What happened in the past doesn’t stop what needs to be done today; follow my will. Do not fear, little flock. The Father has chosen to give you the kingdom! Do not fear, as God promised His people in Haggai’s day, he promises you: I am with you.

Despite your failing to follow through with your intentions, “I’m not leaving you.” During the time of discipline that no one enjoys and it’s hard, your Lord assures you, “I am with you. I have not abandoned you. I am with you not because of your best intentions or well-meant promises but because I chose you before the creation of the world to be mine. That’s why I sent Jesus to live with you so that he would do what you could not do on your own. He didn’t stop at the intention but perfectly followed through to follow my will. He died on the cross so you would be forgiven. He lives so that you would be with me. When you were baptized I washed you of every sin, give you a guilt-free conscience, and make you my child. When you struggle against that temptation again, you are not alone. When you have fallen into that pet sin, I am right beside you to pick you up again. When you are tired out, wore down, and discouraged from carrying out my work: I am with you. When you feel like you aren’t doing enough, know that Jesus already has done it all for you. Whatever is done according to My will and in Jesus’ name, I take pleasure in you and am honored.”

“I am with you,” the Lord says. And not just in the thoughtful I’m-here-as-a-support-but-not-actually-there sort of way. He is with you in the Lord’s Supper where you receive Jesus’ body and blood poured out for you for forgiveness and strengthening of faith. He is here with us in the Word that is preached and when it is read. Give careful thought to your ways, to what your heart is set on, to where your priorities lie. Give careful thought and be encouraged, people of God, the Lord is with you as you put his will first in your life. Amen.