

REMEMBERING WITH A PURPOSE
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Texts: Haggai 2:1-9 & Luke 20:27-38

Haggai 2:1-9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

What we see in the first reading this morning is a snapshot, a snapshot of a community that's been through a disaster and has lost nearly everything but has somehow managed to hang on; a community that's working hard and picking up the pieces and slowly rebuilding its life; a community that's trying to stay true to itself and resist the

temptation to take what seems like an easier route. The community we're talking about is Israel, and to understand how things got to this point, we have to go back about 70 years before the time of the reading and look at one of the biggest turning points in Israel's history—the Babylonian exile.

Back then the Babylonians were the dominant power in the region, and they invaded Judah, the southern part of Israel, which was a separate kingdom. They marched in and conquered the land; they destroyed Jerusalem, the capital; and they basically kidnapped the entire ruling class, the nobility. They put hundreds of people in chains, men and women, young and old, and carted them off to Babylon in what was essentially a forced relocation. The only thing I can compare it to would be the Trail of Tears from our own history books.

Now fast forward about 50 years. A lot has changed politically. The Babylonians are gone, the Persians are now the dominant power in the region, and one of the things they do is adopt a new policy with regard to the exiles. Darius, the Persian king, tells them they're free to go home; they're free to go back to Judah. Which sounds wonderful, right? Time to break out the champagne and start packing. But the problem is, most of the exiles don't want to go back Judah. They want to stay where they are. They've been there for three or four generations at this point. They've made a whole new life for themselves. Plus, as far as anyone can remember, all that's left of Judah is a smoldering pile of rubble. Why would they want to go back to that?

So pulling up roots and starting over yet again in a place most of them only know about from stories their grandparents told is not a wildly popular idea, and it'll take a prophet named Isaiah to eventually convince them that this is in fact God's plan. God wants them to rebuild Judah, and God wants them to start with the temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of Israel's life for hundreds of years. That's their number one priority, Isaiah will tell them. That's what they need to do before they do anything else.

Now fast forward another twenty years—right up to the time of the reading. By now the former-exiles are back in Judah, and things are not going well. Life is hard; the living conditions are rough; and people have pretty much given up on Isaiah's vision. They've put the temple project on hold, and they're building homes for themselves instead because they're tired of living in tents. They want to feel more settled; they want to be more comfortable. And you can't blame them for that. But the thing is, this new priority, while it makes sense on a practical level, on a spiritual level it's undermining their faith and chipping away at the soul of their community. Instead of trusting God to provide for them, they're taking matters into their own hands. Instead of living into God's future, they're setting their own agenda. Instead of resting assured that God is with them, they're seeking their own security.

So along comes a new prophet, Haggai, and he basically tells everyone: *Don't let your frustration overwhelm your faithfulness. Stick to God's plan, and don't be afraid. God is with you just like when you were slaves, and God brought you out of Egypt. God didn't abandon you then, and God won't abandon you now.*

Now fast forward just a little bit beyond the time of the reading, a few years down the road. Everything has turned around. The community has actually listened to Haggai and

rebuilt the temple. And although they still don't have houses to live in, they've gained something far more important. They've learned to follow God again, and they've gotten back the sense of identity and purpose that they lost during the exile. For the first time in more than 70 years, they know who they are and what they're about. They know they're God's people. And it all started here, with this reading. It all started with Haggai reminding them of God's promises in the past. It all started with him saying: *Remember what this temple was like in its former glory, before the Babylonians came? Well, take courage. Even though it doesn't look like much now, God's going to fill it with splendor again and make it even better than it was before. God's going to fill it with silver and gold and make this whole land prosperous. So get to work, and know that God's right here working alongside you.*

I think that says a lot about the power of remembering—not the kind of remembering that gets lost in nostalgia, not the kind of remembering that pines for the good old days, but remembering with a purpose, recalling the past in order to gain strength for the present and hope for the future. That's the kind of remembering that Haggai was encouraging Israel to do, and that's the kind of remembering we've been talking about for the past two Sundays.

Two weeks ago—on Homecoming Sunday—Jim Gertmenian was here, and he got me thinking about what it means to remember with a purpose by asking the question, *What of this life endures? What of this life remains?* The answer I came up with as I was listening to him preach was, *Nothing*. Nothing endures, nothing remains—not forever. There's a moment for every human being, no matter how famous, when the last person alive who has any memory or knowledge of us passes away, and our names pass away with them. We're erased from time. It's like we all die twice. First we die to ourselves, and then we die to the world. Which is a really depressing thought. But what makes it bearable, and not existentially terrifying, is the belief that we never die to God. God is eternal, God exists outside of time, and so we live on in God's mind forever.

Maybe that's another way to think about what resurrection is—being remembered so perfectly by a God who loves us so fully that we are reborn into a new kind of life, a new kind of existence, one that never fades or diminishes. I think Jesus is saying something along those lines when he tells the Sadducees in the second reading that God is God “not of the dead, but of the living” because in God's mind all of Israel's patriarch's who died ages ago are still very much alive.

So Jim got me thinking about the power of *God's* remembering, which is the power to render death meaningless. And then last week—on Heritage Sunday—Ann Beams was here, and she encouraged us to remember with a purpose by leading us in what she called “a holy conversation”—a time when we recalled together the ways this church has made a difference in our lives: the experiences that have changed us; the people who've supported us; the memories that continue to inspire and motivate us.

I've only been at Valley for going on three years now, but already I can look back and see how much of a difference this place has made in my life—the way I've been welcomed and received; the faithfulness I've seen in others; the energy and spirit I feel in this place. So Ann got me thinking about the power of *our* remembering, which is the power to look back and

see how God's been with us in the past, which enables us look ahead and feel confident that God will be with us in the future—the same God who can overcome anything, even death.

So we're not just taking a stroll down memory lane today. It's Remembrance Sunday, but we're remembering with a purpose. And the same goes for the last two Sundays. This is Valley's 40th anniversary, and we've been talking a lot about those first 40 years and all the great memories we have. But what we're really celebrating is the next 40 years, and all the great memories that are yet to be made. So let's get to work, and let's never forget that God is right here working alongside us. Amen.