



First United Church of Oak Park

The Common Good

Haggai 1: 1-11

The Rev. John Edgerton

Sept. 12, 2021

I had pictured it in my head so clearly: a year that would feel normal, a chance to heal from the heartbreak of the pandemic with the wholesome medicine of tradition. Today was supposed to be a grand re-entry. The beginning of weekly indoor services, live-streamed to the internet to expand the church's reach, the launch of church school, the launch of church programming, processions, a grand organ prelude Michael Surratt and I have been dreaming of for a long time. I had pictured it in my head so clearly. It was not to be.

What has happened for First United, of course, is a tiny disruption compared to the unfolding tragedies across the country. But even so, I had been holding on for so long to a simple, complete hope. I had a simple complete hope that a long-desired return would make things all better again — would make me all better again. That hope has been disappointed. How can I make sense of that as a person of faith? Disappointed hopes, I mean. As a person who leans upon hope, how can I make sense of a reality that is much more complicated than the hope I had held on to?

In considering this and praying about it, across the stage of my memory and spirit came walking the prophet Haggai. Very little is written about the prophet Haggai, one of the 12 so-called minor prophets. Not a lot is written about Haggai, but we DO have an unusually precise idea of when this prophecy occurred. The first day, of the sixth month, of the second year of the reign of king Darius of Persia. Let's call it September 1, 520 BCE. And it matters very much, this timing, because it situates us inside of the story of the people. And in September 520 BCE, the people were suffering from disappointed hope.

You see, the people had spent long lonely decades in exile in Babylon. Their country devastated, all that was familiar was gone. And for all those long lonely decades, what they dreamed about the most was to return. They dreamed of healing from the heartbreak of exile with the wholesome medicine of tradition. They dreamed of their lives being restored to what had been, their worship restored to what had been, the world restored to what had been. They were holding on to the promises of the prophet Isaiah, that God would soon bring them back to the place of their longing — “Do not fear for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine,” says the Lord. “When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame

shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior.” And on September 1, 520 BCE, the people had returned home. In 520 BCE they were living in the holy land, in Jerusalem.

But ... things were not how they hoped. They had dreamed of full bellies. But the crops had been doing poorly, and the people were hungry just like they had been in exile. They had dreamed that the golden treasures of old would be processed back into the center city. But there just wasn't enough money to go around. People were still struggling, just like they were in exile. They had dreamed of being safe, of being free from fear. But new dangers were all around and they were stuck in fear again, just like they were in exile.

Their simple, complete hope had been disappointed by the reality of return. What was happening? Were the words of the prophet Isaiah not to be trusted? Were the promises of God shoddy, wobbly things? How were the people of God to understand their disappointed hopes?

Enter the prophet Haggai, who answers the question on the people's hearts — why is this happening? Why has reality fallen so short of our hopes? And the prophet Haggai has an austere but honest answer. The prophet says God has held up her side of the bargain; you must hold up your end, too. The most important work of all had been left undone. The individual good has been looked after, but the common good has not. Each of your households has rebuilt your homes, but the Temple remains unfinished. It is not that God demanded worship be more important than shelter; God does not seek aggrandizement over all other concerns. The reason is that the Temple was the place where all the people shared equally in benefit. The Temple was the center of common life. The Temple did not belong to any one person but to all the people. With the Temple unfinished, the individual good had been looked after, but the common good had not. No one could truly return until all people were included. The common good was the only path back.

The people wanted to know why hope had been disappointed. The prophet Haggai tells them — if you secure the common good, only then can God's promises be fulfilled. The promises of God were for the good of the whole of the people. The promises of God were for the common good, or else for none at all. Place the common good at the center of how you live, and then God's promises shall come as swift as the day. So says the prophet Haggai.

I had pictured it in my head so clearly: a year that would feel normal, a chance to heal from the heartbreak of the pandemic with the wholesome medicine of tradition. Today was supposed to be a grand re-entry. That was not to be. How am I supposed to make sense of the disappointed hope that our church would not have the simple, complete return I had dreamed of for the long lonely months? To make sense of it, I think I need the prophet Haggai, the austere but honest word of the prophet that the common good

is the only path back home. And in this country, placing the common good before individual good is not our strong suit right now.

I don't mean to point the finger. I really don't. Selfishly, I confess it freely, I had hoped that here in Oak Park we could be okay even though other parts of the country were suffering. The interconnectedness of our lives and the fearsome virility of this virus shows that the common good is the only path back home. Selfishly, I confess it freely, I had hoped that a promising vaccine rollout in this country meant our nation would be okay even if other parts of the world were suffering. But the mutability and adaptability of this virus has shown us that the common good is the only path back home.

The way forward is in the plainest, most ordinary work — to care for one another. To set the sights of ambition beyond mere individual good and to build the common good. As Christians this ought to be our joy, it ought to be second nature. We ought always to place the common good at the heart of what we do.

This is the way of the prophets, this is the way of the Law of God. The way that seems easier — to look after my own individual good only — the common good will suffer and my own selfish ends will be frustrated as well. But the way that seems harder — to look after not merely the individual good but the common good as well — this is what will offer a way home. This is the only way home.

When the common good becomes our highest good, it is then that the promises of God come as swift as the day. When the common good becomes our highest good, it is then that the words of the prophet Isaiah will ring out: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine,” says the Lord. “When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior.”

The words of God, strong and true and to be trusted. God shall hold up her end of the bargain. May God help us hold up our end, too. Amen.