

Haggai 1:1-11

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

²This is what the LORD of Armies says: “This people has said, ‘it is not the right time for the House of the LORD to be built.’”

³So the word of the LORD came through Haggai the prophet.

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 of Armies says. Consider your ways carefully. ⁶You sow much seed but you harvest little. You eat but you are never satisfied. You drink but you never become drunk. You get dressed, but no one is warm. The one who makes money puts that money into a bag with a hole in it.

⁷This is what the LORD of Armies says. Consider your ways carefully. ⁸ Go up to the mountains, bring lumber down, and build the House. I will be pleased with it, and I will be glorified, says the LORD.

⁹“You expected much, but look, there was little. When you brought it home, I blew it away.

Why did I do that? This is a declaration of the LORD of Armies. It is because my house lies in ruins while each of you is busy with your own house. ¹⁰ So it is because of you that the heavens have withheld the dew and the earth its produce. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the olive oil, on everything which the soil produces, on people, on livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.

Giving to God First Makes No Sense

I.

“It just doesn’t make any sense...” We know $1+1=2$, but there are plenty of times in life when the numbers just don’t seem to add up. “He was a good kid from a good family. How did he get hooked on heroin?” It just doesn’t make sense. “He was a hardworking family man. They had just celebrated their 20th anniversary. How could he walk out of their lives like that?” It just doesn’t make sense. “She took such good care of herself. There was no family history. Breast cancer?” It just doesn’t make sense.

We like to think, especially when we are young, that life makes a lot of sense. We like to think there is a law of nature, a scientific breakthrough, or a Google search that will make everything make sense. The older and experienced among us know that there are plenty of times when life obstinately refuses to make sense. What sense is there to the hatred someone like Hitler displayed in his concentration camps? What sense is there in the abuse of a child? What sense is there in sudden sickness after a lifetime of health? It just doesn’t make sense.

II.

It just doesn’t make sense. At least *some* of the Old Testament Israelites must have been thinking along those lines as they were dragged away into captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem had been surrounded and assaulted. Their homes had been torched. Their lives were going up in smoke. The Lord’s temple was a smoldering heap of rubble. Weren’t they supposed

to be God's chosen people? Why the war? Why the destruction, the death, the deportation? It didn't make a bit of sense.

70 years later when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from captivity they must have been thinking the same thing. The Holy City of Jerusalem looked like a ghost town. The walls and gates were broken and crumbling. The temple courts—once thronging with people and shaking with the sounds of singing—were a heap of rubble and overgrown with weeds. It just doesn't make sense.

The Israelites of the Prophet Haggai's day decided to roll up their sleeves and put some sense back into life. Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt. A new altar was installed on the Temple Mount. Soon they would dig a little deeper and lay the foundations for a brand new temple.

But...you know how people are. They soon lost interest in rebuilding the temple and began to pay attention to building projects that made a lot more sense—their own houses. Why should they prioritize precious time and shekels into building *God* a house when their *own* houses needed work, too? Because *this* makes sense—if mother is happy, then everyone is happy. Make the Mrs. happy. This makes sense, too: we'll take care of *ourselves* right now so that we'll be in a better position to take care of God's house later.

But...you know how people are. The "later" never came. After laying the foundations, almost 15 years went by without any real progress on the temple itself.

That's where the minor Prophet Haggai—with only two chapters—proclaims a major message. Humanly speaking, his message doesn't seem to make a bit of sense:

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 of Armies says. Consider your ways carefully. ⁶ You sow much seed but you harvest little. You eat but you are never satisfied. You drink but you never become drunk. You get dressed, but no one is warm. The one who makes money puts that money into a bag with a hole in it.

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The Israelites, it turns out, were preaching a sermon about personal priorities with their paneled houses and their procrastination with God's house. Self first. God second. In other words—*giving to God first doesn't make a bit of sense.*

Do *we* ever think like the Israelites of old? Charles Schwab tells us to "pay yourself first." Invest your money carefully. If you do *that* you get more money. But if you give money away, you have *less* money. That's the way money works. Right?

Or...if I prioritize the work of the Lord with FIRSTfruits giving, then that means that every other area of my life will suffer, doesn't it? Or if I give my time, talents, and treasures away—that means that I have less for myself and what I love. Everyone knows that the American dream is to have *more* than mom and dad did.

It's true. Humanly speaking, giving doesn't make a bit of sense. It's also true that the default mode of our sinful nature is to keep stuff, store stuff, stockpile stuff, even *hoard* stuff. That's looking out for number 1. We call that the good life. God calls it greed. We call it being sensible. God calls it sin.

Did you notice in Haggai's sermon how the Lord turned our eloquent excuses to "not give" upside down? "You sow much seed but you harvest little. You eat but you are never satisfied. You drink but you never become drunk. You get dressed, but no one is warm. The one who makes money puts that money into a bag with a hole in it...⁹" "You expected much, but look, there was little" (Haggai 1:6, 9, EHV). Translation: the people had less because they gave little. God himself was seeing to that one drought, that one moneybag with a hole in it. Think about it: the God that once fed 5,000 hungry stomachs using only a boy's picnic lunch is the very same God who can insure that a stockpile of stuff won't be able to make ends meet.

Does Haggai's message sober us up this morning?

Try running some of Haggai's ideas through some imaginary prayers:

- "Dear Lord, I thank you for the lowest unemployment rate in America since 1969, while my children's teachers remain about 15% below synod pay standards. Amen."
- "Dear Lord, thank you for allowing me to finally be debt free while church and school still have trouble sometimes figuring out how to make the next budget work. Amen."
- "Dear Lord, I thank you for the 4% growth in America's economy. Now, if pastor would just land the plane of this money sermon, that would be great, because I already know in my head that I'm not going to give one plugged nickel more—no matter what the Bible says about firstfruits giving. Amen."

Somehow those imaginary prayers don't sound quite right when you hear them said aloud, do they? In a not-so-subtle way we, too, are preaching a sermon with our paneled houses and our procrastination with God's house and God's work. Giving to God first doesn't make a bit of sense.

Haggai's words make me wonder about a couple of recent news stories. First, American employment has not been this high since the summer of '69. God bless America! The second story: money spent on video games was up 40% in the first half of 2018—\$19.5 billion! Record employment. Video game sales up 40%. Offerings are absolutely flat. Which makes perfect sense—but only if God isn't first place in our hearts!

We have come to *expect* a full-service ministry with church, school, pre-school, and childcare. But can we *really* expect them to fully function if the paneling of our houses remains our first priority? We have received a vibrant ministry built by the sacrifice of 50+ years of members of this congregation working long and hard to make sure a Christian Day School and church were always a priority.

Listen. I don't want to practice any scare tactics today. I don't want to engage in a shallow, sentimental rah-rah session of "do it for Holy Trinity's kids!" I simply tell you the truth: *You get the ministry you are willing to give for.*

Because we had changes and uncertainty, *this* year's budget still has to be finalized in a special Voters' Meeting at the end of September. We already know that *next* year's budget will have to include a salary for a new principal and moving expenses—besides the salaries that are already in the budget for *this* year. Next year's budget will be based upon how well we give as a family of believers between now and the end of June. We can only do ministry

with what God's people are willing to *give* to their ministry.

III.

Do you think that the people who gave generously to the temple in Haggai's day went home and God let them freeze to death? After Haggai's rebuke, why could the Israelites give so *confidently* to the Lord and his work? Because they believed in a God who *gave himself completely* for us!

In reality, it isn't *our giving* that makes no sense. It is *God's giving* that makes no sense. That the Holy One of Israel would give himself so completely for the sinful ones of America makes no sense whatsoever. That's why it is called "grace."

God's grace is simply amazing. Jesus didn't give 10% of himself for you. Jesus was in it 110% for you and your salvation. What dedication to your salvation did it take for Jesus to leave the streets of heavenly gold for the cow manure of Bethlehem's barn? How much was Jesus willing to give up for us, not even having a house to call a home or a pillow to plop his head on? How full is Jesus' sacrifice for your forgiveness! He goes all the way to the cross for you! He didn't swipe a Visa card for you, or scan the electronic giving code and punch in a number. He shed precious blood to redeem you and made slaves into sons and daughters.

The One who willingly made himself nothing for us on the cross is our everything. In Christ, God graciously gives us *all* things! The One who said: "I thirst" is the One who washed you clean in baptism. The One who cries out "Why have you forsaken me?" is precisely the One who will never leave you or forsake you. The One who prays "Give us this day our daily bread" is the same One who opens his hands and satisfies your desires. Should we trust a God like that? No. Thank *God* that we trust a God like that.

The big issue before our Holy Trinity family is this: Is our relationship with the Savior our life's priority? Or is it just another one of life's hobbies? How can you tell? Do this: go home this week and spend a prayerful ½ hour with your last bank statement. Look at the numbers and see if you can spot any priorities they might point out to you. The numbers don't lie. Take time to pray about what you find—and what you don't find.

Let's open our eyes and see the harvest! The blessings are there right before our faces. Open your eyes and look around you in America. There is absolutely no question that the blessings are there—the resources are there for a vibrant and aggressive gospel ministry. The question is not one of resources, but of our resolve. Where is the Lord and his work on our list of personal priorities? Is he a **FIRST**fruit priority? Or is a leftovers hobby? Will we settle for nice paneled houses? Or do we desire to make a real, eternal difference?

My prayer this morning is that Haggai's message opens your heart in a major way this week. You worship a God who knows how to make much into next to nothing because of our greed—and very little into abundance due to his grace. You worship the ultimate Giver. God gave you his first—Jesus, the Firstborn over all creation. God gave you his best—his Son in whom he is well-pleased. In Christ, God graciously gives you all things. Your God is faithful. Trust him. Bank on his promises. And then...get busy—not building a new house—but filling this one up. Amen.