

November 9, 2025

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“New Sacred Spaces”

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

By an honest show of hands, how many of you knew that the book Haggai was even in the Bible? I made extra-sure I printed the correct the Bible page numbers for you on this one. The prophet Haggai's brief moment of fame is but a blip on the biblical screen... dwarfed in comparison to the prophetic legacies of the greats, like Jeremiah, Daniel, Hosea and the like. He's certainly no Elijah. The book of Haggai is small but mighty and, even if barely, holds an essential place in the overall message for God's people in the Old Testament. Only two chapters, or 37 verses, long, turning one too many of those featherweight pages of your Bibles and you'd miss the book altogether. We could not imagine that one of the most pivotal moments in the story of the Hebrew people hinged on Haggai's brief cameo that only spanned about 3 ½ to 4 months of chronological time.

Notably, Haggai was the first prophet to speak to the remnant who had returned home from exile. Haggai came on the scene in 520 BC. The temple was destroyed generations before that in 586 BC. So, for almost 70 years, God's people had lived in the aftermath of that destruction, albeit mostly out of town and out of sight. Zechariah, who was contemporaries with Haggai, tells us that beginning in 538 BC the Israelites started coming back home after being disappeared by Babylon. So, if you're doing the math, for nearly two decades, from 538 BC to 520 BC, they walked around town tripping over the dust and rubble of their defeated past, a former glory, and a constant reminder of how they continued to ignore the mandate to rebuild the temple upon their return.

In 2005, Katie and I were new residents of New Orleans and newly married, just over a year. Late that year, just a few weeks after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans and claimed the lives of about 1400 people, we were allowed back into the city to assess the damages and claim what of ours was still salvageable. As residents who had evacuated the city starting coming back, we could not shake the image of all the houses bearing the spray-

painted black markings left by search and rescue teams. Surely, you've seen these. First responders sprayed a giant X on the sides of houses to let other searchers know what was found inside. In one corner of the X was the date the house was searched. In another, the number of deceased persons found in the home. In another, a symbol to mark if there was a hazard found, like a gas line or a collapsed structure. To see these everywhere was apocalyptic and made it feel even more like a war zone.

While Katie and I ended up moving back to Texas, my in-laws, who were also living there at the time, ended up staying. I remember visiting many years after Katrina—maybe even a decade or more—and being floored that many of those markings still remained on many of the houses. In some parts of the city, it seemed as if the storm had just swept through only days before. I remember telling Katie, the city can never move into its future until they remove those visual reminders of what was a national catastrophe.

I imagine it being similar for the Israelites. Yet, no ancient near east demo crew were going to come and remove the debris of the temple. They were confronted in a very visual way with their apathy to rebuild. When the people of God came home from exile in Babylon, they expected to find comfort, restoration, maybe even a taste of that old promise—the land flowing with milk and honey. But what they found instead were these reminders of their devastation: Their cities were gone. Their fields were overgrown. Their homes were in ruins. Hope met reality, and reality was hard.

So they did what survivors often do: they focused on getting by. They worked their fields, they built up their homes, they tried to make ends meet. And though they had been sent home with the clear call to rebuild God's temple, years passed—and nothing happened.

Haggai spoke God's message to them: "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? . . . Consider how you have fared. You have sown much and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes."

You get the sense that there was this sort of malaise in the air, even an apathy toward the Spirit's call in their lives. And even in the pursuit of their own comforts, by way of delaying the work to which God had called them, there was a dissatisfaction.

Haggai tried to break open their imaginations for the future: “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” Very few were left who remembered the magnificence of the old temple, but that memory could inspire them to motivate a new generation.

Yet—jumping ahead quite a bit—the new temple would pale in comparison to the old. Those former days of Solomon—when cedar from Lebanon could be imported along with the finest ivory, gold, and silver—those days were long gone. In fact, when you compare the old place with the new—especially for those who remembered the old place—it looked quite pathetic. What Haggai knew, as did Zachariah, and ultimately Zerubbabel, who saw the completion of the new temple, was what that old southern gospel song sang about: Little is much when God is in it.

Haggai’s message was to remind the people of God’s presence that was still with them: “Yet now take courage, all you people of the land . . . 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.” This promise didn’t dissolve with the crumbling structure of the temple. God was establishing a new sacred space that had less to do with physical location and more to do with covenantal relationship.

Here’s what I think we can take away from this: God is always doing a new thing. Faith is inherently a forward-looking project. The best way to squash the movement of the Spirit is to try and reclaim those “former glories” or dwell on unmet dreams and desires. And when the present reality doesn’t live up to “how things used to be”, we can get paralyzed in the present, unable to seize upon the new thing God is wanting to do.

Our church is currently going through a season of discernment for its future. In this, God is wanting to give us a fresh vision into which we can live. The last couple of weeks, we have been rediscovering the past stories that have shaped this congregation. That is important work in order to move forward. Yet, in this work there is also a temptation: to try and reclaim those former structures. Walking into this sanctuary on any given Sunday these days, you’d hardly know that the membership used to be nearly 800+ members strong. If we lived in the mindset to Make Church Great Again in light of that history, we would be paralyzed by a present reality that does not live up to that expectation.

We often pine for the past so desperately because we lack adequate imagination for the future. For some, it's not dwelling in the past which keeps us from moving forward, it's the comforts of the present. Church has become quite cozy for us. Church minister and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor once said, "When life is pretty good and church is pleasant enough, who needs resurrection?" The radical prospect of resurrection is fearful to those who are lulled to sleep by the comforts of the present. These too are immobilized by lack of an adequate imagination for the future.

Haggai's brief prophetic ministry to the people of God, reminds us even today that when you serve a living God, you must ready yourself for the new—even unexpected—thing God is wanting to do. Because as it turns out, God is really good at manifesting love and grace in the least likely places. Will we miss it?

For us, as the church, the sooner we learn that it was never about our physical building, that it was never about the size of our membership, or our giving, or our denomination, that it was never about the influence our religion has to shape the culture or how important we are in the eyes of our politicians... The sooner we learn this, the quicker we can build toward something truly transformative in our communities. It's always been about the presence of the living God in our midst. The sooner we can learn this, the more agile we will be when God wants to do a new thing among us. Dear friends, may it be so. Amen.