

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

In the sixth month, 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 who 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 will 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."*

People Prayers: Praying for Leaders - November 6, 2022

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

I'm sure on this Sunday before Election Day, the topic in many congregations is the question of whether God is with us or not. The supreme irony in all this is that there are many who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ who are desperately praying for a Republican victory on Tuesday. There are also many who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ who are desperately praying for a Democratic victory on Tuesday. There are, certainly, those who want neither party to win, and others who plain just don't care.

How have we reached such a point in our history that churches are so divided about the will of God for our nation and our world? On whatever issue you care to mention, whether it is women's rights, climate change, public safety, or national security, there is not just disagreement, there is violent disagreement. Last week, the husband of the Speaker of the House, Paul Pelosi, was brutally assaulted at his home in San Francisco. Yet, what happened to him is far from unique. Elected officials and judges all over our country have been attacked, intimidated, threatened on countless occasions. While we'll all be grateful on Wednesday when the political ads stop bombarding us, I cannot recall a time when the accusations flying back and forth about candidates has been more vicious.

Let me say from the outset that it is not my place as a pastor to use this sermon time to endorse any particular candidate. I'm sure if you've listened to me for any length of time you could probably make a good guess as to my personal preferences. Yet while some preachers will name names and will invoke the name of God on behalf of certain candidates and causes, I do not consider that to be my role.

The task of the church is quite straightforward: we are here to proclaim the Word of God as written in the scriptures as well as our human abilities allow us to do so. I cannot make a recommendation to you because from God's perspective, all human rulers fall short of what God expects from us. That does not mean they all fall equally short or that some are just plain bad but others are really bad. I am by no means saying that Adolf Hitler and Abraham Lincoln are equal.

The reason for my not endorsing candidates is simple: when the church attaches itself to individual leaders, no matter how attractive they seem to be, the church and preachers run the danger of being dragged down with these leaders when they inevitably fall short of people's expectations. There is no leader of any political party who could possibly meet all the demands of all the people. For one, all

political leaders are human beings. Therefore, they are sinners who fall short of the standard God demands from all of us. Second, political leaders are influenced by and motivated by many factors they don't necessarily control and are subject to circumstances they never could have anticipated. George Bush could not have expected 9/11 any more than Donald Trump expected Covid or Joe Biden foresaw the war between Russia and Ukraine. We can debate how well they handled these situations. However, all these events remind us that control is merely a human illusion. Political leaders can promise everything and make themselves appear in favor of what their supporters want. But at the end of the day, their ideas and plans can be upended in seconds.

Scripture continually reminds us not to put our faith in kings, princes, priests, or the wealthy. They come, they go, they live, they die. Instead, we need to place our faith and trust in God who is forever. Such was the situation the people of Israel faced during the time of the prophet Haggai. Haggai preached in Jerusalem, or what remained of it, after it had been destroyed by the invading Babylonian army. We have spoken of this turning point before. For centuries, Israel found itself falling away increasingly from God's standards.

God called the Israelites to be a special people, a chosen people, a blessed people who we supposed to conform their lives to God's Law and God's intentions for human living. With the Ten Commandments as their guide, Israel was to be light to the world.

But as we know, that did not happen. Israel, which was supposed to be so different from the rest of the world, surrendered its unique place in God's plan. They rejected the task God gave them to perform. They supported unjust rulers and unjust laws. They treated the poor with indifference and stole land and freedom from the regular working people. Although the Bible is full of the stories of prophets warning the leaders of Israel to return to God or face the consequences of their actions, the kings and priests of Israel did not listen.

Israel was destroyed. Jerusalem lay in ruins. And the Temple, God's Holy Temple, which represented all that Israel was supposed to stand for to the world: the Temple was nothing but rubble.

Isn't it strange that the only time many people turn to God is when they are in trouble? The only time they are willing to at least listen to scripture or the Word is when they've hit rock bottom? Well, the Israelites had certainly hit rock bottom — literally. Jerusalem was indeed nothing more than a pile of rocks and their most important building, God's Temple, was strewn all over the city.

But finally, finally, finally, the people were willing to listen. They were finally open to first admitting they had messed up big time by ignoring God and God's commandments for centuries and second, realizing their only way forward was to return to God with a fresh spirit and a renewed commitment to God and the Law.

But how? Earlier prophets had urged the people to follow the essentials of the Law: Love God, love your neighbors as yourselves. Seek justice, love kindness, support the widow and orphan, accept the strangers in your midst. In other words, be fully human with each other. The prophet Haggai had a different plan.

He urged the leaders to rebuild the Temple. Yes, he knew perfectly well that we don't need an actual temple in order to love God and care for each other. However, the Temple was extremely powerful in and of itself. The temple was a way of constantly reminding the people of the presence of God. God is everywhere and in everything, of course. Yet, we cannot deny the power of visual, physical, concrete symbols to keep us aware of our promises and our commitments.

So Haggai urged the leaders of Israel to renew their faith in God by starting the long process of rebuilding the ruined Temple and once again making it the center of what Israel stood for. Notice that he addresses his remarks to the leaders: Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. It was only they who could summon the people to this task.

Leaders matter. Leadership matters. The integrity of leaders matter. Each week we pray for our leaders saying the following: Guide the rulers of the nations. We pray for Joe our President, Philip our Governor, Cory and Robert our Senators, Donald our representative, and the Justices of the Supreme Court. Move them to set aside their fear, greed, and vain ambition, and bow to your sovereign rule. Inspire them to strive for peace and justice, that all your children may dwell secure, free of war and injustice.

Why do we pray this? Are we trying to cast a spell over those in charge? Hardly. We know perfectly well that Christians all over the world are asking God to guide their rulers one way or another. There are Christians right now praying for the immediate return of Donald Trump to the White House. There are Christians right now praying for a Democratic Party sweep of the midterm elections. Neither is likely to happen. You notice that in this church, we always pray for our leaders, regardless of party or policy.

Friends we don't do this so they will follow our desires. We pray for our leaders to remind us that we are responsible for leading them with God's help. When the prophet Haggai commanded the leaders

of Israel to rebuild the Temple, he was reminding them that the Temple was truly symbolic of the nation and of God. Haggai was calling the leaders to lead by showing the people God is first.

The entire point of scripture, the essence of our faith is very simple: when we put God first in our lives, everything else will fall into place. For Israel, struggling to recover from the disaster that was the Babylonian invasion and takeover, the people needed to remind themselves of who they were and whose they were. By focussing their energies on God and God's Temple, they would have something that could unite them and strengthen them for the future. Without that central Temple, Israel was just a group of desperate, searching people likely doomed to be absorbed into the neighboring tribes and kingdoms.

For Christians therefore, for you in this congregation today, the question facing us in two days is equally simple. Which candidates seem to be placing God's values and God's law ahead of human ideas? We need to pray, search our hearts, read scripture, and decide with the Spirit's help about those who will work to bring our nation closer to God's priorities as opposed to those who will push us away from them.

Jesus made it clear time and again. The prophets of the Old Testament made it clear, time and again. The Ten Commandments make it clear, time and again. Our God is a God of justice and fairness. Our God is a God who favors the poor, the oppressed, the widows and orphans. Our God is merciful and is always willing to try again with us until we get it right. Our God loves kindness and stands with those who go out of their way to help those in trouble. In the beginnings of the book of Genesis, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, the one who murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy; Cain asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Jesus Christ makes it clear that the only answer is as resounding, "YES" we are all tasked by God to be our brother's and sister's and this planet's keepers. That is God's priority for us.

Our leaders, at least the ones we vote for, must do the same. When they don't we must speak up and speak out and remind them of their duties to our nation. Those who spread lies and hatred must be rejected. Those whose lives are inconsistent with Christian living must be rejected. Those who can only lead because they accept money from corrupt businesspeople despite what they believe in their hearts simply do not deserve to hold office of any kind.

The process of discerning leaders who will follow God's agenda is not always easy. Pray, pray like you have not prayed before. Pray for our nation, pray for our leaders, pray for yourselves.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.