

Pastor Letter: Embracing the Day of the Lord (11/6/22)

During last week's worship service, an individual made it publicly known the decision that three local United Methodist Churches were making concerning their separation or remaining with their Methodist denomination. These were very difficult decisions that each member and each congregation had to make spiritually, theologically, and financially. The Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches had already wrestled with these challenging and divisive issues several years ago, which resulted in hurt feelings, emotional scars, and bloody wounds. Each member and each congregation had to discern the Lord's Truth and the Lord's authority in these challenging issues.

I was reminded about these issues as I prepared for a sermon using this week's scriptural passages. Our Old Testament lesson comes from the prophet Haggai who was the first prophet to address the postexilic issues. Many Hebrew people remained in Judah during the 70-year Babylonian captivity and many exiled Hebrews remained in Babylon instead of returning to their homeland. Those Hebrews that remained in Judah took possession of the property of their exiled kinsmen. Surrounding nations filled the power void created by the exiled Hebrew political authorities.

When the Persians conquered the Babylonians, the Hebrew people were allowed to return to their native homeland, reestablish a form of puppet government, rebuild the city of Jerusalem, and rebuild their sacred Temple. Problems of authority developed among the surrounding nations, current property owners, and returning Hebrew people. We read how Nehemiah helped to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the priest, Ezra, led the efforts to rebuild the Temple and reestablished the religious practices.

The writings of Haggai cover a very short period of time from August 29 – December 18, 520 B.C.E. His prophecy is directed to four groups of people, "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 (returning) remnant of the people, (and the existing Judeans), (Hag. 2:1-2). Haggai points out that the returning people are busy rebuilding their own farms, vineyards, businesses, and homes, while the Temple of the Lord lays in a pile of rubble.

The prophet reminds them to think about what Solomon's Temple looked like compared to the bare foundation of the current incomplete Temple structure, "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?" (v. 3). Haggai tells them 3 times to have courage and reminds the Hebrews of the Lord's presence, "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," (vv. 4-5). The Lord's Spirit is with them.

Haggai continues to remind the Hebrews of the Lord's authority, "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. ⁹The latter splendor of this house (Temple) shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts," (vv. 8-9).

We read in other Old Testament books of how the Hebrew people rebuilt the wall, the city of Jerusalem, and the Temple, as well as reestablishing the worship of the Lord. The book of Haggai ends with these words, "The word of the LORD came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month: Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of

Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders; and the horses and their riders shall fall, every one by the sword of a comrade. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the LORD, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the LORD of hosts," (vv. 20-23).

Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David and the promises the Lord made to David were fulfilled through Zerubbabel, an agent of the Lord of Hosts. Jesus is also a descendant of King David.

Our New Testament lesson comes from Paul's 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians. In Paul's first Letter to the Thessalonian Church, he addresses the second coming of Jesus Christ. False teachers were attempting to convince the people that Christ's second coming had already taken place. Paul clarified the issue with the following words, "As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here," (Thess. 2:1-2).

Paul continued to explain the truth of the gospel message with these words, "Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God," (vv. 3-4).

Just as each member and each congregation of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist Churches had to discern the Lord's Truth and the Lord's authority in their various issues, the members of the Thessalonian Church had to discern who was teaching the truth about the 2nd coming of Jesus Christ. The Hebrews rebuilding the wall, Jerusalem, and the Temple had to discern who were the rightful owners of the land, who was speaking the Word of the Lord, and what were their building priorities.

Each of us has to make daily decisions as to the priorities in our faith journey. Discerning the Lord's Truth, Authority, and Spiritual Direction is a constant wrestling match with a secular world that is rapidly adhering to Paul's description of the "lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction," (v. 3). If we are truly a follower of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, it is imperative that we learn to discern the triune God's voice, and the call to discipleship, as well as the Lord's Truth.

I will end this letter with the words of the apostle Paul's blessing and benediction, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word," (vv. 16-17). Amen.

Pastor Larry