

GLORY DAYS

Haggai 2:1-20

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Glory days well they'll pass you by
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye
Glory days, glory days

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Yeah, just sitting back trying to recapture
a little of the glory of, well time slips away
and leaves you with nothing mister but
boring stories of glory days

Glory days well they'll pass you by
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye
Glory days, glory days

Lyrics from Bruce Springsteen's 1984 hit song. Personally, I find the song somewhat depressing. I hope that all of my "glory days" are not already in the past. What do you say to a person or to a people who believe that the glory days have already gone by? Such was the situation of the prophet Haggai. Listen to what he says to God's people: "Who of you is left who saw this house [Solomon's Temple] in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" (Hag 2:3, NIV). With reference to God's house, the glory days lie in the past—or so it seems.

Haggai's ministry, as recorded in the Bible book that bears his name, was carried on from August 29 to December 18 of the year 520 B.C., although it is probable that the book provides only a snapshot of a short span of the prophet's life and ministry. Haggai lived and ministered during one of the lowest points in the biblical history of the Hebrew people. Some sixty-six years earlier, in 586 B.C., the city of Jerusalem had been defeated and its temple desecrated by the armies of Babylon. A large portion of Jerusalem's population had been exiled to live in the labor camps of Babylon, while others had escaped and settled in foreign countries far from their homeland. Only a few remained in the promised land. But in 539 B.C., the international situation began to change. The

newly powerful Persian Empire, under the leadership of Cyrus, defeated Babylon and thereby became the master of the fate of the exiled Jews. Cyrus made it possible, perhaps as early as 538 B.C., for exiles who lived in his newly acquired territories to return to their homelands. And so some of the Jews, after half a century of residing in Babylon, began to return to the promised land. Since many of these Jews had been born in exile, they had never seen their homeland. Of those who came back, a few seem to have set about the task of restoring the temple that had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Their efforts, however, were to little avail. Most of them would have been hard pressed just to survive, and though the work had begun on the temple, little progress had been made with the reconstruction project. Haggai was faced with a state of despair and sluggishness. Despite the poor economy and a pessimistic people, Haggai was one of a small handful of men who saw that something had to be done about the temple. Without the temple, there was no symbol of God's presence among His people, there was no sign of national pride, and so there was no hope of the people escaping from the captivity of their circumstances.

Last Sunday, we looked at chapter 1. On August 29, 520 B.C., the word of the LORD was spoken through the prophet Haggai. In only a little more than three weeks, against all odds, work began on the temple on September 21. Almost a month has passed now since the work of rebuilding the temple was started, and this brings us to chapter 2.

^{2:1}On the twenty-first day of the seventh month [October 17, 520 B.C.], the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ²“Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ³‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? ⁴But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ⁵‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

⁶“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty. ⁸‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ⁹‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (Hag 2:1-9, NIV).

October 17 would have been the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles. It would have been a public holiday, and people from the countryside would join the crowds from the city in the festivities of the day. And quite naturally, on an occasion such as this, many of the folks must have gone over to the temple precincts to see what progress had been made in the building renovation project. After all the commotion about getting going again, the physical evidence of progress must have been meager. Faced with what must have seemed as so little progress, human nature reared its ugly head. Look what they are doing here? This will be a half-baked building compared with the old temple that Solomon built! Maybe a few octogenarians (80-year-olds) were present, people who had actually seen the original temple before its destruction. Recollections of the glory days of the past only produced frustration in an audience filled with those who had never seen Solomon's temple. And the nay-sayers, they would have had a field day: Why did it take so long to get going again? Whose idea was this anyway? Better not to have started than to have built something like this structure!

In such a setting, Haggai once again addresses the governor, the high priest, and the assembled crowds. He takes note of the grumblings and mumblings, the disappointment and the discontent, but Haggai converts all of this into positive words of encouragement. Despite all criticisms, the people are to take courage and to get on with the work, for God is with them. The temple now under construction would one day be more splendid than the temple of the glory days.

Many of the mainline denominations in the United States are losing members these days, and the influence of the church on society seems to have been lost. Some present-day religious bodies issue lots of pronouncements, sending letters to the President, urging Congress to take particular actions, writing legal briefs for the courts, and carrying on lobbying in the nation's capital. But all such activities seem to have little effect on the course of our society, and the media seems to take notice of the church only when there is some scandal or sensational happening to report. To be sure, many politicians give lip service to religion at election time, and more conservative groups currently appear to have some clout with government. But on the whole, the old-time religion appears to have lost its prominent role in shaping the course of our nation.

Those who know what a mighty voice the church once was in America mourn this

loss. Like the elderly men and women in this scripture from Haggai, many in the older generation of churchgoers feel that the church has lost its glory. The past power of the church, the vitality of its membership, the magnificence of its services seem now to be nothing more than memories of past glory days. When the present pales in comparison to the past, there is often little hope for the future. It is difficult to go forward if we are always looking back.

But I believe that the best is yet to be! I believe that glory days for this congregation, the Plymouth Church of Christ, are yet to come! I believe that God speaks to His church just as He spoke to the remnant of Judah, and He says, “Take courage . . . take courage . . . take courage . . . work, for I am with you.” *God is with us!* Can we imagine the power that is available to us through the presence of God? The God of Haggai, the God of the Bible, is the almighty Lord who raised up the Rocky Mountains, carved out the Grand Canyon, and flung the stars across a billion galaxies. He is the God who created a people for Himself and who has overcome every evil human attempt to do away with that people. He is the Lord who judges nations and calls kingdoms to account, the Ruler who commands empires to rise and fall, and the Sovereign who moves all history toward the fulfillment of His purpose. This God created every form of life in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and when death defied His will, through Jesus Christ this God broke the power of death forevermore. Such a God of power, of mercy, of purpose, of faithfulness, is the God who is with us! Do we not then have every reason for courage in the face of our frustrations and our failures?

The God of Haggai, the God of the Bible, does not dwell on the past. He takes the past and does away with it and makes us totally new creatures in Jesus Christ. And He does so because He is on the move toward a goal. Our Lord is no static God, at rest in His heaven, recalling past glory days. Our Lord is on the move toward the establishment of His kingdom on earth, toward the time when there will be no more tears or pain or sorrow and the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. Is that not our reason to work, then, in building up His church? God leads His church toward the time of His kingdom come on earth, and He bids us trust Him and follow Him along the way.

“I am with you . . . I am with you” (Hag 1:13; 2:4). That promise of God Almighty

punctuates the preaching of Haggai, and it is the silver lining that runs through the whole story of the Bible. As Jesus said to His disciples at the close of Matthew's Gospel, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20, NIV).

Here at the Plymouth Church of Christ, we are embarking on a major building renovation project, and like the folks in 520 B.C., we need to know that the Lord is with us. I believe that He is. I believe that He speaks today and that His Spirit stirs-up people today. I believe in glory days that are to come. God is with us! Do you believe this?