***OBLIGATION OR OPPORTUNITY?***

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Texts: Haggai 1:1-8, 2:1-8 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-8

In just two days our nation will choose a president for the next four years. It is a day that has been a long time coming and so today is either the calm before the storm or the eve of the eve of the end of a year-long storm that has battered the nation with a litany of accusations, denunciations and revelations that have sparked far more anger and angst than healing and hope. It is little wonder that half of Americans are expressing election-related stress according to the American Psychological Association[[1]](#endnote-1) – and maybe you are among them. Hear then the word of the Lord spoken through the prophet Haggai, “Take courage, do not fear, for I am with you.” Haggai may not be a household name in your house, but his words perhaps should be – not just this election year, but all years!

In the year 587 B.C.E. the best and brightest of Israel had been carried off to Babylon; the temple had been destroyed; the people’s hopes, dreams and faith had been shattered. For fifty years they lived under Babylonian rule. Then in 539 B.C.E. the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon and gave permission to racial minorities within Babylonian provinces to return to their homelands if they so desired. While many remained in Babylon where they had established new lives, homes and businesses, many Jews did travel back to the Promised Land to reestablish themselves among that remnant who had remained behind. They built and rebuilt homes, planted gardens, opened businesses, and resumed worship in the land first promised to Abraham. They had been at that work at home for twenty years when the prophet Haggai appeared with a word from the Lord.

The Word he carried to the people of Israel was this: it is time to rebuild the temple! Seventy years after its destruction by the Babylonians and twenty years after Israel’s return from exile, the temple still lay in ruins. The people had rebuilt their homes, lives and businesses, yet the enduring symbol of their faith and the holy site of their worship remained a pile of rubble. The time wasn’t right, contended the people; there were too many other things to do: personal things to do,

important things to do,

expensive things to do

fun things to do.

They had neither the time nor the resources to rebuild the temple; it would have to wait for another day, another year, perhaps another generation.

I have heard that song before. Countless times I have sat in the rocking chair in my office counseling young couples preparing to marry and heard them explain why they are unable to worship at any church regularly – they are just too busy and that Sunday morning time is too precious! When children arrive, they will find a church, because, they say, it is important for kids to go to church – which leads me to ask why it would be so important for the kids and not for them. I have heard promises from lapsed members to come back to church one day, some day soon, any time now – and we’re still waiting. I’ve heard promises from faithful members to tithe once the new house is built or the car is paid off or the kids finish college or the economy improves, or… I’ve heard promises from teens to reengage in youth group once this season is over or this performance is done or this class is finished – promises made some seasons or performances or classes ago. “I’ll be back… I will give… I will help out… when the time is right; it just isn’t right yet – for me, for us.”

“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven,” says the writer in Ecclesiastes. When is the time right for God in your life? When does the house of the Lord get built? When does the Word of the Lord get read? When do your talents get used for God’s good purposes instead of your good purposes? When do your offerings become tithes instead of loose change? The busyness of life has a way of pushing God down the list of priorities – we’re too busy with other things:

personal things,

important things,

expensive things

fun things.

We’re busy to the point of exhaustion, but never quite satisfied. We want more – more things, more money, more status, more success! *You eat, but you never have enough*, says Haggai. *You drink, but never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. You earn wages that somehow slip away.* You are busy with the wrong things, says Haggai. The Chinese symbol for “busy” contains the characters for *heart* and *loss*. Busyness is a loss of heart, a loss of the very heart that Christ calls us to give fully to God in love. Our lives are so cluttered with stuff that doesn’t really matter, with busyness that doesn’t really mean much, that we find little time or opportunity for the God who really does matter.

This is not to suggest that God gets added to the bottom of the laundry list of things that you have to/want to/need to do each day. It is to say that you should throw out the old list and start a new list that begins with God things – with prayer, worship and reading Scripture, with tithing and giving your talents and time in service to others – before adding to the list all the things that keep you from those faithful practices. I am not suggesting that you give up bathing

or walking the dog

or going to school

or playing golf or bridge or Angry Birds or whatever it is you play.

There is a time for those activities as well. Just be sure that your time doesn’t push God’s time out the window. Don’t squander the opportunity you have with the time and treasure you have, for where your treasure is – including the time you treasure – there your heart will be also.

Israel’s treasures were invested everywhere but where they should have been, and the ruins of the temple long after the exiles had returned bore silent witness to misplaced priorities and squandered opportunities. Like the temple, their faith lay in ruins. The God to whom they had cried for deliverance in exile was an afterthought now that they were home. Haggai brought them face to face with the reality of their misplaced priorities. His words stirred the hearts of the people, and they remembered the Lord who had remembered them in their distress. They reoriented their hearts which led them to redirect their treasures and to set aside the busyness of their lives to make room for God. Within four months they began to rebuild the temple. Their priorities were reordered, their procrastination at an end, for the time being. They trusted the promise of the God who said to them, *Take courage;* *I am with you*.

600 years later Paul urged the Corinthians to reorder their priorities, to step up and dig deep and support the ministry and mission of the early church. The poorer church in Macedonia enthusiastically supported that mission, even “begged” for the privilege of sharing in that ministry, and Paul urged the Corinthians to follow their example. The Corinthians prided themselves on excelling in faith, speech, love and spiritual gifts, but their giving told a different story and undercut their claim to great faithfulness. Paul urged them to walk the walk they claimed to walk and give more. Gifts to God are a measure of faithfulness just as your prayer life and love for others and service to those in need reflect your priorities. God is the God of all of life – not just the religious part, so to speak. All that we have is a gift from God, given with the opportunity to use it for good and for God, or to use it for more selfish purposes. We choose.

Giving is not an obligation forced upon us – a condition of God’s love for us or a threat under which we live – but an opportunity to express our gratitude and whole-hearted commitment to the God from whom all blessings flow, an opportunity to share together in God’s good work among us. Our gifts, suggests Paul, reflect the genuineness of our faith, and testify to where God really stands in our lives. Say all you want that you love the Lord and that God is a priority in your life, but then look at your checkbook or bank statement or calendar or pledge card and see if it tells the same story. Is God first or do you have other priorities that look a lot more like personal luxuries or zeal for a particular sports team or keeping up with the neighbors or feeding an addiction that is more devilish than divine?

This is the sixth day of the eleventh month of the 2016th year of the Christian Era, the eve of the eve of a presidential election, and on this day the prophecy of Haggai has come to you saying, “Do not fear. I am with you.” Now is the time to make a statement to that God about the priorities in your life – not tomorrow, not next year – now! What then will you say and do with your time, with your talents, with your money, with your vote, with your pledge card? What will you do, people of God, you anxious, busy, BLESSED people of God? Amen

1. “Even with a big win, Clinton shouldn’t count on a mandate”, Kristen Soltis Anderson, *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2016, Section B, p.2 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)