

10 for 10 Stewardship Emphasis Week 1 – February 2, 2020

Haggai 1:1-11

1 In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest: 2 This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’” 3 Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” 5 Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 6 You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” 7 This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. 9 “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the Lord Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. 10 Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. 11 I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”

“It just doesn’t make sense....” We know $1+1=2$. But there are plenty of times in life when the numbers just don’t seem to add up. “He or she was a good kid from a good family. How did they get hooked on drugs or end up in jail?” It just doesn’t make sense. “He was a hardworking family man. They just celebrated their 20th anniversary. How could he just walk out of their lives like that?” It just doesn’t make sense. “She took such good care of herself—there was no family history. She got breast cancer?” It just doesn’t make sense. We like to think, especially when we are young, that life makes a lot of sense, that everything will work out fairly and properly and in the right order. But the older we get the more we see that there are plenty of times when life refuses to make any sense!

At least some of the Old Testament Israelites must have been thinking along those lines as they were dragged away into captivity in Babylon. They had seen Jerusalem surrounded and attacked, their homes destroyed, their lives going up in smoke, the Lord’s temple torn down. Weren’t they supposed to be God’s chosen people? Why the war? The destruction? The death? The deportation? It just didn’t make any sense.

Seventy years later when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from captivity, they must have been thinking the same thing. The Holy City of Jerusalem looked like a ghost town, walls and gates broken and crumbling, the temple courts once filled with people and with the sounds of singing were a mute heap of rubble overgrown with weeds. It just didn’t make any sense.

The Israelites of the prophet Haggai’s day decided to roll up their sleeves and put some sense back into life. Jerusalem’s walls were rebuilt. A new altar was installed on Temple Mount. Soon, they would dig a little deeper and lay the foundations for a brand-new temple. But we know how people are. They soon lost interest in rebuilding the temple and began to pay

attention to building projects that made a lot more sense—their own houses. Why should they prioritize precious time and money building God a house when their own houses needed work too? Because this does make sense: If the family is happy, then everyone is happy! This makes sense too: We'll take care of ourselves right now, so that we'll be in a better position to take care of God's house later. But we know how people are. The "later" never came. After laying the foundations, almost fifteen years went by without any real progress on the temple itself.

That's where the minor prophet Haggai—with only two chapters in his book—proclaims a major message that, humanly speaking, doesn't seem to make any sense: 4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (the temple) remains a ruin?" 5 Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 6 You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." 7 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. 9 "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. 10 Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. 11 I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." The Israelites, as it turns out, were preaching a sermon about personal priorities with their paneled houses and their procrastination with God's house. Self comes first. God comes second. In other words, giving to God first doesn't make any sense.

Do we ever think like the Israelites of old? Financial planners tell us that if we "pay ourselves first" and invest it carefully, we will get more money. But if we give money away, then we have less money to work with. That's the way money works right? Or if we prioritize the work of the Lord with firstfruits giving, then that means that other areas of our lives will suffer doesn't it? Or if we give our time, talents, and treasures away—then that means that we have less for ourselves and what we love? After all isn't the American dream about having more than our parents or grandparents did? So, it's true. Humanly speaking, giving to God doesn't make any sense. It's also true, that the default mode of our sinful nature is play the role of the rich man in Jesus' parable (Lk 12:13-21)—to keep stuff, store stuff, stockpile stuff, even hoard stuff—as we look out for #1. We call it the good life. God calls it greed. We call it being sensible. God calls it sin.

Did you notice in verse 4 how the Lord dealt with their excuses for not giving? You plant much, and harvest little; eat and drink, but aren't satisfied; clothed, but not warm; earn money that is lost. God turned much into little. The people had less in their lives, because they gave little to the Lord. God himself was seeing to it, one drought, one holey purse at a time. The God that would later feed more than 5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish to start, is the very same God who can make sure that a stockpile of stuff won't be able to make ends meet.

When we talk about financial stewardship, about giving to God with our best, with our firstfruits, it's not about giving to a church budget to cover our ministry for the year, it's not

about giving to a building project to help rebuild God's house. It's about evaluating our own personal giving. I or anyone else cannot get into your heart to do that, only you can do that. So does Haggai's message hit home for you this morning/evening? Does God come first or does self come first? Are you saving responsibly or saving to stockpile and hoard? Do we make excuses why now is not the right time to give? Are we struggling to make ends meet because perhaps God is making less out of everything we try to do to get more? We all have a sinful nature that will push self ahead of God. But if we're too ashamed to tell others our answers to those questions then perhaps it is time to turn to God in repentance for our failures in this area of giving.

Going back to the Israelites, do you think that the people who gave generously to the temple in Haggai's day went home and God continued to let them starve and freeze and not make ends meet? After Haggai's rebuke, the Israelites could give confidently to the Lord and his work because they believed in a God who gave himself completely for us.

It isn't our giving to God that doesn't make any sense. It is God's giving to us that doesn't make any sense. That the Holy One of Israel would give himself completely for the all the sinner of this world makes no sense whatsoever. That is why it's called grace. And God's grace is simply amazing. Jesus didn't give 10% of himself for us. He was in it 100% for us and our salvation. What dedication to our salvation did it take for Jesus to set aside his rule on heaven's throne to come be born in a stable in Bethlehem? How much was Jesus willing to give up for us, never having a house to call his home or a pillow to lay his head on? How big was Jesus' sacrifice for your forgiveness as he went all the way to the cross for us? He didn't simply write a check or swipe a credit card to pay for our sins. He shed his precious blood to redeem us and turn slaves into sons and daughters. None of it makes any sense and yet we thank God every day that in Christ he has graciously given us all things.

When it comes to our own giving, it is not simply, "well, this is what God commands!" It is not just about what we might get out of it for ourselves. It is simply about our response. We give to God because it makes sense—we see what God has given to us and we open our hearts and respond out of love and thanks. When it comes to firstfruits giving, we give to God first and not second or last. One easy way for us to check our spending priorities is to prayerfully look at our bank statement or credit card statement. Where is our money going? How is it being spent? Firstfruits giving will look different for every individual. For some it will be tithing, 10%. For others it will be more, 15% or even 20%. For others it will be less. But no matter where we are at, we give to God first, trusting that he will take care of the rest in our lives. We see how he has blessed us with spiritual gifts and know that he will take care of our physical needs and bless us in that way too.

It just doesn't make any sense... Our sinful nature will try to tell us that about our giving to God when in reality it is God's giving to us that doesn't make any sense. And yet he gave anyway so we respond in turn with our best, our firstfruits. I mentioned before that we do not simply give to meet a budget or raise funds for a project. The Lord has blessed this congregation in recent years in that we've met our budget and paid for some projects. But think about the opportunities that are still before us to share God's Word with people in this world. That is part of this 10 for 10 challenge. Try an increased firstfruit giving for ten weeks and see what God does in your life. Then as a congregation we may have a unique opportunity to spend more on

ministry, to pay for some more projects as well as increase our support of our synod's missionaries and worker training schools. Our God is faithful and he will bless our efforts. Amen.