

Sermon: Not of the Dead

New North Church, Hingham

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6 November 2022

Based on **Haggai 2:1-9; Luke 20:27-38**

The last time we read anything from the prophet Haggai was never, mostly because this is the only Sunday in the three-year lectionary cycle where Haggai is offered as a choice. It's only two chapters. How dangerous could it be that no one talks about it?

The answer to that is, not at all.

In fact, it's very helpful. As it is such a short book, it's easy to take it all in in one sitting, unlike reading prophets such as Isaiah or Jeremiah.

Haggai is very precise in telling us when things happened. We know that in 538 BCE, King Cyrus of Persia let the exiled Jews go home to Jerusalem; he even encouraged them to rebuild the Temple. We also know that Darius became king in 522. Now, 18 years have passed since the exiles began coming home. And the Temple is still not reconstructed.

Why not?

Let's look at Haggai's timeline. In earlier verses, on the first day of the *sixth* month, 'thus says the LORD of hosts: these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.' Oh, really? While my house lies in ruins, says the LORD, things will go poorly for you – drought, small harvests, and so on – it's been 18 years, people.

Then Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, and the remnant of the people *obeyed* the voice of the LORD, and the LORD, through Haggai, said, 'I am with you.' And the LORD stirred up their collective spirit and they got to work. That was in September.

In today's reading, it is now October 17, the twenty-first day of the *seventh* month, and not much has happened on the Temple job site in the past month. One problem may be that the remnant of the people – meaning those who returned – and the people of the land – meaning those who stayed – were not seeing eye to eye.

This is understandable because both groups were still dealing with the trauma of the Exile and with the shared sense that an absent God had abandoned them. So, why bother?

In the Gospel reading, what the Sadducees describe in their convoluted question is called Levirate marriage which was designed to keep the husband's family line alive through a brother who marries his widow and presumably will have children together.

Bodily resurrection was a developing hot-button topic in the first century. Naturally, everyone had an opinion about it. The Sadducees were religiously conservative and believed only those things in the books of Moses that one could demonstrate as being true, and resurrection wasn't one of them.

For the Sadducees, immortality came to the righteous through the promise of descendants through whom one would live on after death. So, when they asked their question, they were not looking for instruction from Jesus; they were just trying to trap him, to prove him wrong. They would have been very happy if Jesus had accepted or validated their world view.

It's not for nothing that this is the only time Luke mentions the Sadducees in his Gospel.

Needless to say, Jesus did not cooperate. His answer, as usual, reset the debate into something beyond the original question. He shows once again that we live in God's world and that God makes the rules. Last week in our reading from Isaiah, the LORD said, "let's argue it out," knowing who would win.

We can't tell God or Jesus what is true or not; instead, they reveal it to us.

And the truth today is that both readings are for and about the living, and of how God is the God of everyone: once, now, and in the future.

God's words in Haggai's oracle are healing words that were meant to bring comfort to everyone in Jerusalem, from the governor to the high priest, down to all the people. Take courage, said the LORD, for I am with you; my spirit abides among you; do not fear.'

This passage, indeed, the whole book, is about the rebirth of the nation, the resurrection of the Temple, and a return to normalcy after a time of trauma and exile.

Years ago, I knew a guy who once said that when he and his wife went out to parties, he would often join a group of people and listen to them talk for a while, and then ask an innocent question that he knew would get everyone riled up. Then he would step back and watch.

In their own way, the Sadducees were like that, except they were a stubborn bunch, unwilling or unable to consider an alternative viewpoint when it came to matters of faith.

Sometimes, like the people in Haggai's Jerusalem, we look to the past as the glory days that the future cannot possibly match. But then God says, you ain't seen nothing yet.

We all want to know what happens when we die. Maybe it's all about perspective. We perceive that everything stops. But does it?

Death is loss. We've all lost loved ones and it hurts.

Death brings vulnerability to the survivors, if the person who died was their sole means of support. Jesus calls us to care for the widows and orphans and this is why.

These are hard realities for those of us living in this age.

You have heard it said that God is Love. It is also true that God is Life. Jesus said that God is the God of the living, not of the dead, and for God, all are alive. No one is dead in God's eyes. Only in our eyes do we see life end.

As it happens, Jesus and the Sadducees are in the Temple during their debate, so it's a good thing it was rebuilt. The difference between Jesus and the Sadducees is the difference between hope and despair.

What if the question changes from 'what will happen when we die,' to 'how may I live this eternal life now?'

What if, as we seek to follow God, to know God's will, to live in God's truth, rather than work within the limits of this age, we instead work to be present in God and to make real the kingdom that is to come?

And 'in this place I will put peace,' says the LORD of hosts.

Amen.