

Haggai 1:1-6: *“In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord, came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.”*

Haggai 2:5-2:9: *“Speak now to Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, 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? 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. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”*

“Are we there yet?” “Are we EVER gonna get there?” Now look, to a generation of parents who’re blessed with cellular technology for streaming videos, these questions might not come from the mouths of their children as quickly, but my guess is the questions still come.

“Are we there yet?” “Are we EVER gonna get there?” I’ll never forget taking the long trek between Springfield Ohio and Lenoir, NC in the backseat of my parent’s blue Plymouth Duster. You see, every year, a few days before Christmas, my parents would bundle up my sister and I so we could visit relatives in North Carolina when I was younger. We’d leave, early in the morning, about 4am. Just about the time we got halfway to NC, my sister and I’d start annoying one another out of abject boredom. On top of that, we’d ask Mom and Dad questions with what I’m sure was a nauseating repetition - “are we there yet?” or “are we ever gonna get there?” On and on that’d go until we were near enough to my grandmother’s house to move from misery into excitement again.

There’s just something about middle times which are just frustrating. Now what I mean when I say “middle times” is simply this. Middle times are those occasions when you can remember the glories of the past and you’re heading into an unknown future but the fullness of that future has yet to reveal itself.

I can give you an example from my own life, I think I’ve shared this before so if I’m being repetitious, I apologize. When I felt called to be a pastor, I left a job teaching culinary school in order to go back to college and get my degree. As an instructor, my students treated me with respect and a fair degree of reverence. As a returning college student though, trudging through general ed requirements with my 18-year-old peers, things were different. On top of that, by the second semester, the bloom was off the rose. The early excitement was fading into the dreary reality that the whole endeavor was gonna take a number of years. Until I met Natalie, things were pretty depressing. There, stuck in the middle between what I once was and what I was hoping to become, I was pretty miserable.

And I think we all get to those kinds of stages at points in our lives. We all find ourselves throughout life’s journeys somewhere between the good past and the unknown future. I call it the misery of the middle. Maybe it comes as we switch careers or find ourselves looking for work. Perhaps we encounter the misery of the middle as we endure treatments for illnesses. We remember what it was like to be well and look forward to being healthy yet again but, in the meantime, things are bleak. It’s there at some point in all our lives. It’s as inevitable as hitting West Virginia on a trip from Springfield, Ohio to Lenoir, NC. It’s sure to come into all our

lives because no matter how hard we try, we just can't live in either the past or the future. All we have is the moment at hand and sometimes the moment at hand isn't quite what we'd like it to be!

The misery of the middle is so universal that psychologists came up with a highfalutin' name for it. They call it a "liminal state." It even has a definition on Wikipedia. Here's what they have – (From the Latin word *limen*, meaning "a threshold") "A liminal state is a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical subjective state, conscious or unconscious, of being on the "threshold" between two different existential planes, as defined in neurological psychology and in the anthropological theories of ritual by such writers as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner." I just love Wikipedia. It may not always be accurate but it sure SOUNDS right, doesn't it? Now look, you could go out and read Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner and I think what you'd find is nothing more than this– "there's misery in the middle." There's a certain dis-ease that comes in between the past and the future. And believe me, when you're there, when you're in the misery of the middle, it's easy to diagnose.... Life takes on as grey a cast as the skies outside have been recently and you start asking the question "are we there yet?" with a tangible dread instead of a hopeful optimism.

You begin wondering aloud to your spouse or your friends if you'll ever get to a point where things will be different and, by different, you mean BETTER. Which, when you really think about it, is just a way of asking the question "are we EVER gonna get there?" And when you're really stuck in the misery of the middle, you wonder – where in the world is God in all of this?!?!

Today's scripture reading from the prophecy of Haggai gives us an insight into the misery of the middle. Here were a people that, I can assure you, knew only too well what it felt like to be stuck right there in-between the good past and the uncertain future. Now Haggai was one of the last of Israel's prophets. The word of the Lord that came through him confronted a people mired in the misery of the middle. You see, the people of God were now back in Israel following their exile in Babylon. King Cyrus of Persia had sent the Jews back to their homelands with money to rebuild the Temple and military protection. What they returned to wasn't pretty. The city of Jerusalem was largely in ruins. The people around the city mostly apathetic or hostile to the returning exiles. But you see, there was hope. Great hope for the future lay right there in the city. God had entrusted them to rebuild the Temple so they believed nothing could stand in their way. After all, they must've figured that God himself returned them home and so from now on, life was just going to be a bowl of cherries. The start of any journey always begins with excitement and optimism, doesn't it?

Fast forward a few years and the journey to that great hope for the future had given way to a different reality. Internal politics within the Persian empire had cut off their funding as well as their military protection. As a nation, they stood there, seemingly alone in the world. On top of that, they were tasked with a now impossible mission to rebuild God's house. And you see when the tides turned, when optimism turned to skepticism, people began doing what people always seem to do when they're stuck in the misery of the middle...they starting concerning themselves singularly with themselves. Feathering their own nests. Instead of building up God's house, they started paneling their own walls. Instead of busying themselves with the work God tasked them with doing, they devoted their time and energy to insuring the best-interests for themselves and their families. The work they'd begun there at the Temple was abandoned.

It's funny how when we're stuck in the misery of the middle how easy it is to focus inwardly instead of outward. In that in-between state, our impulse is to worry and labor more and more for ourselves, largely forgetting about the outside world around us. Gone from our minds are other people. Utterly forgotten about is the work we're called to by God himself.

I think we're seeing that dynamic take place on a lot of levels, from the corporate to the personal. I think perhaps we're seeing it go on perhaps right here in our church. Here's what I mean... Here in America, we know what it's like to be stuck in the misery of the middle. We can all remember the boom years of the past or even further back and we wonder, what in the world happened to it all? We look backwards to a time when our retirement funds brimmed with growing balances and our next job was no harder to find than a quick scan of the want ads for they were always replete with eager employers. We look at gas tanks and wonder, when did gas get so expensive? We all know what it's like now. Even though the economists keep telling us a recovery is

coming, it's hard to see tangible signals of it when more and more people file for unemployment. Listen closely to what people are saying when they talk about the economy and I promise you, you'll hear echoes of the same question I'd ask my parents on those long trips to NC. "Are we there yet?" And in that space, we as a nation seem to be more concerned about ourselves and our families than ever before. We're demonstrably less minded towards caring for others and ever-more intently preoccupied with what's in it for US which I think explains why there's so much partisan rancor right now.

Maybe personally we're in an in-between time in our life. Perhaps we can look backwards not too terribly far when worries were far off in the distance and the living was easy. Now however, all that's changed and we don't quite know where we'll be in a few years. And as we focus more and more on ourselves, it becomes a swirling eddy of doubt and confusion from which escape doesn't seem possible. We keep asking the question – "Are we EVER gonna get there?"

We sit here in this sanctuary and see the pews and wonder what's happened to us over the last two decades. Where's that missing generation? Why aren't we growing? We hope our future is bright but, at times, when we've got under 100 people in worship, we may well ask the question "why AREN'T we there yet?" As those people in Israel asked similar questions of God, the prophet Haggai brought words from the Lord providing the answer. To begin with, the Lord indicts them concerning how they've been living life there stuck in the misery of the middle. When things started looking bleak and they turned inward and began paneling their own walls, they'd made a big error.

So, God challenges their impulses. He says essentially that they'd made a categorical mistake. That focusing on themselves during those middle times was, in a way, a refutation of his directions. And he points directly to the fruit of their labors as evidence of it. In the first part of our reading, God asks and answers the question - "how's all that self-focus working for you?" Thankfully, God doesn't make them stew for very long.

Soon, in our second reading, God shares with His people great news. "*Take courage all you people of the land*" He says. *Take courage for I am with you.*" Imagine that! Right there, smack dab in their misery of the middle, right there as they existed in a liminal state, confused and frightened, right there stood God! They weren't alone in anything they were doing. God's presence was with them even though they couldn't feel it. They just couldn't sense Him as the direct result of them being overly preoccupied with themselves. And God doesn't leave it at that. He doesn't just say I'm with you so kick back and take it easy. Life really is just a bowl of cherries. No, instead God says "Work!" Not on your own projects but rather work on the task I've given you. And we've got to wonder how those words from God reverberate in our lives. Could it be that when doubt and worry come into our life and our impulse is to spend more time thinking about ourselves and our families that we're just exacerbating the problem? Is it possible that when we devote ourselves to mostly ourselves and our families then all we're really doing is perpetuating our own misery of the middle? Because you see, God dispels the idea that there's misery in any time and place for God's people. Through the prophet Haggai God reminds us of something we all too often forget.

We're NEVER alone. The best moments of our earthly life stand neither behind us nor are they ahead of us. The best moments of our life are right NOW because God is with us right NOW! Throughout the New Testament, we're told of Christ's ongoing and active presence in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ is always there, testifying to the goodness of God. When we're battered and broken and wonder if the future is going to be any better than the present misery, we're feeling there's One that's with us who's the source of our consolation and hope.

Folks, what it all boils down to is this – The misery of the middle turns out to be entirely of our own manufacture. Wonder what van Genepp and Turner would think of that?!?! That the misery of the middle isn't an existential state of being, *rather it's the creation of our own broken minds.* We're never truly miserable, not really, because we're never apart from the gracious presence of the Lord, Jesus Christ. God is with us, just like He was with the people of Israel. And God continues to issue his orders to us just as He did to them. "Work" he says. Now it's important as Christians we remember that this work that we're called to perform in the Lord's service isn't done to enact our salvation. We're children of God made not by the work of our own hands but

rather by the waters of baptism. There, at the font, God blesses us with an indelible seal of his love and protection. But those who are truly God's also hear God's ongoing directions. *"Don't panel your own walls...work on building my house."* Which in modern parlance sounds something a little bit like this, I think. *"Stop worrying so much about yourselves. I've got that all under control. Trust me! All of it turns out really, really well in the end. Instead, how about this? How about you try doing what I tell you to for a bit and see how that works out?"* And the work God calls us to, well, it's not terribly different than the labor he called the people of Haggai's time. Work, He says, on building *his* house. A house not with walls, yet filled with people. Work, says the Lord, on growing His church!

Now what does that mean? I believe it means that in the coming year, we need to see ALL of this congregation involved with its mission and its ministries, not just a few dedicated souls. It means that if you're called to serve, you pray over the matter and turn it down only with great reluctance. It means that *everyone* should labor in an outreach ministry of this church. It means individually we should ask ourselves the question – "Am I spending more time and energy paneling my walls than I'm working to the Glory of God?" It means corporately, as Cook's Memorial Presbyterian Church, we ought to be asking tough questions of ourselves as well. What are we doing to visibly witness to the power and presence of the Lord within this community? Are we doing sufficient outreach to the neighborhoods around us or are we far more dedicated with our time and resources to our own interests and comfort? What it means, ultimately, is EXACTLY what God tells us through the prophet Haggai. *"WORK!" "Build my house"* He says.

Through the prophet Haggai, we're told that the present moment bristles with the splendor and power of God's presence. As to the future, well, the future is even better than we can imagine! *"For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts."*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.