



Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Haggai 2:1-9

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Did you know, Christmas is just three days away. Not to put any pressure on you, but is the house ready? Are your tree skirts packed with presents? Have you made your final travel plans? ... Christmas is almost here.

And yet, at least for me this year, Christmas seems so far off. Christmas seems almost an eternity away. When I look at the world around me, when I look at what's happening in the here and now in the lives of people around me, and when I see the brokenness that exists in our greater world, I can't help but wonder, is Christmas *really* here? How is it possible to be celebrating Christmas when there is so much hurt, pain, and brokenness still running rampant in the world around us?

I had to take a pause this past week and honestly ask, what *is* Christmas? Why do we celebrate Christmas? What is it we are preparing ourselves to celebrate in the days to come?

For the past three weeks of Advent, we've claimed to be preparing ourselves for the celebration of Christmas by learning from and singing some of the *Songs of the Season*. I tried to start with those songs to answer my own questioning: what is Christmas? The songs have proclaimed that at Christmas, we celebrate Christ as the fulfillment of the prophecies, which proclaimed that through the lineage of King David, God would find a way to bring about new life in a world filled with death. The songs have poetically announced that at Christmas, we celebrate that in and through Christ, God's Word becomes reality, and therein justice and mercy shall reign in the world. The songs, in calling us to prepare for Christmas, have gone so far as to make political statements that decry Jesus as a new King to rule over all nations, and reign through justice and peace.

These are all great messages, and certainly the Biblical text supports each of these sung claims as to what we're preparing for in the Advent of Christ and the celebration of Christmas. But as I pondered the meaning of Christmas, I noticed something about each of these songs and the claims they make. The songs of the past few weeks disconnect the presence of our own humanity from the work of God. While not declaring anything untrue, the promises of these songs regarding the work of God in Christ are too closely linked into an American partisan theology that says God's going to come and change the world by making sure everyone *else* out there gets their lives fixed. These themes of Christmas support the claim that there is brokenness in the world, that there is injustice in the world, that there is sin in the world, and praise be to God, Christ is coming to make sure everyone else who is perpetuating these issues will be fixed.

Republicans pray that God might change the lives of Democrats, and vice versa. Coastal city dwellers pray God might change the lives of rural mid-westerners, and vice versa. Millennials wish for a change in the mindset of Boomers, and Boomers a change in the actions of Millennials. Atheists want to see a change in the loyalty of evangelicals, and evangelicals a change in the belief of atheists. ... Everyone is hoping that the change God is promising in the birth of Christ will be lived out in the faith, actions, thoughts, words, and engagement of the other, as if peace, hope, joy, love, truth, and justice, are only lacking in the world because the *other* has failed to have *their* life changed.

I'm always grateful that, in times like this of great uncertainty, God speaks in new ways to offer a vision of redemption. That's why the prophet Haggai was called in the midst of the people Israel, to speak in a new way to offer a vision of redemption.

Haggai is an often forgotten prophet, and perhaps our overlooking the prophet shouldn't be surprising. Some scholars suggest that Haggai only served as a prophet for four months. To understand Haggai's impact in this short period, we have to set the stage for Haggai's appearance.

Almost 150 years after the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians, the remaining Israelites in the Southern Kingdom of Judah were conquered by the Babylonians, and exiled from their homes. At the time of that exile, around 586 BCE, the great temple, completed during King Solomon's rule some 400 years prior, was destroyed. The Israelites were exiled for about 50 years. They began to return to their homes in 538 BCE. They returned to a homeland that lie in waste. Their homes still in ruin from the conquest of the Babylonians some 50 years earlier. At the time they were allowed to return, there were hardly 50,000 Israelites who came home.

As they made their way back into their homeland, they did as any people would, they started by picking up the pieces of their homes.

I remember going to New Orleans about 7 months after Hurricane Katrina hit, back in 2006. Seven months after the storm, our team, along with many others, were still going down just to gut the houses, which were filled with black mold from water-soaked drywall. People had started to move back into their homes, but were finding their property was a complete loss, and that it would take months, and in some cases, years, before their homes were livable again – assuming they had a house to return to. Some returning families found nothing but piles of debris were their homes once stood.

Imagine that times 50 ... instead of 7 months, they were returning to their homes that had for 50 years lie in waste following the Babylonian conquest. The Israelites who returned did what they could to recreate a life that was reminiscent of what was prior to the exile. But this "remaking" took time. After 15 years of being back in the homeland, the homes were rebuilt,

the communities reformed, and life was starting to return to a level of normalcy. It is at this time that Haggai is called to speak to the people.

The first verse, by offering us the date and time, gives us the event for Haggai's proclamation. This announcement will take place at the Festival of Booths – a time when the full congregational gathering of the Jewish people would be taking place. Such a gathering sets the stage for a space where Haggai could address Zerubbabel, the governor of the Judah, and Joshua, who is the High priest, and the "remnants of the people" (that is, the rest of the Israelites who have returned from the exile).

Haggai's focus in this text will be on the temple, which is *the* central physical representation of the faith for Israel. First, Haggai must move the people beyond the dismay they have over the shattered state of the temple.

The temple of Solomon, in all of its grandeur, had been destroyed just 65 years prior. Solomon's Temple had taken 7 years to build with over 150,000 artisans, carpenters, and masons all working together. It was an extraordinary complex, decked in gold and silver. Yet, in its current state, the temple was seen as nothing. The Temple, the central figure in the faith of the Jewish people, was seen to be in shambles. In their attempt to rebuild the temple, which had been in process for almost 15 years already, the temple paled in comparison to Solomon's. And what could you expect? There were less than 50,000 Israelites to pull from, most of which were weak, women (who at that time wouldn't have been welcomed to work on the temple), and children. A good estimate is that maybe 20,000 Israelites were pitching in to rebuild the temple, most of whom were not skilled artisans, carpenters, or masons.

Haggai first asks, "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?" ... Perhaps a question every church leader asks on arriving in a new church, "How many of you remember the glory days of this church?" ... "How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?"

Haggai knows the historical importance of the Temple for the people of Israel, and yet, even those who knew it in its grandeur seemed to have forgotten its importance. At stake "was nothing less than the very survival of a people as an identifiable religious community. Without a center of religious life represented by the Temple, there was real danger that the community would simply disappear, absorbed into the shifting scenes of world history."ⁱ In forgetting to focus on the Temple, the people had lost their focus on God in their midst, the very foundation of their identity.

In his God-inspired critique, Haggai uses the Temple to draw the people's attention to a greater issue. The Temple is just a building, and will never again have the grandeur of what it had in the past. But the Temple is, for the people Israel, *the* physical structure that represents their belief in God's faithfulness. In his critique of the state of the Temple, "[Haggai] is calling them to account for not rebuilding the community of the children of God."ⁱⁱ

“Haggai proclaimed that no matter what the external circumstances might be at the present moment, they were still God’s people and therefore had some responsibility to act like his people.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this text, Haggai is not offering the future coming of a new king – Haggai is not referring to a future that involves a Son of God ... no, Haggai is saying that God is with you in the here and now – God has always been with you – God will continue to be with you ... so *get to work*. This is on *you*, so what are you waiting for?

“Haggai was willing to dream God’s dream. He was willing to look beyond the present circumstances and see what could be, willing to look beyond the present failures and invite in a future based on God’s action in the world, and on the fact that God had again chosen a people through which to reveal himself! And Haggai was willing to put out the effort to work as if what ought to be really **could** be!”^{iv} Haggai’s belief that what ought to be really could be led to a call among the people to remember that in this great vision we have of God’s action in the world, we are not excluded from the call of this work in and on our individual lives.

Though Haggai is not referring to Christmas in this prophecy, I find his admonition to be the piece of Advent preparation I’ve been missing. Christmas is not just some Hallmark creation in which we are invited to imagine a snow-globe world that is pretty, and happy, and pristine, not matter how just and righteous that world may be. No, instead, Christmas is a time to acknowledge that even in the midst of our brokenness, God intends to change even our own lives for the well-being of the whole – the community – the shalom of creation. Christmas is a time to acknowledge that God sends the incarnate Word that even you and I might know that *we* are broken, that *we* are filled with sin, that *we* are hurting people in need of a Savior.

And so I find it fitting on this last Sunday of Advent, as we draw near to Christmas, to consider the hymn, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. Written in 1744 by Charles Wesley, a brother of John Wesley, the hymn invites us to consider the work of God in our personal lives in the advent of Christ.

Consider these words of the hymn, “Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; free our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.” ... This season of Advent is intended to help us name, we each have our own fears that keep us from living into our true selves in God – to claim the identity of a child of God who, in Christ, can be made whole. We each have our own sins, those others can see, and those we hide from the world, that prohibit us from living in healthy relationship with God, with ourselves, and with one another. The song is sung as a yearning personal request in the season of Advent, in hopes of what is to come at Christmas, “free us Lord ... let us find our rest in thee.”

Verse two and three echo the greater sentiment of global hope, “dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.” But the fourth verse returns to the personal focus, “By thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone; by thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.” As Haggai would say, “We have allowed our lives to be ruled by selfish ambition; we have allowed ourselves to be focused on our own well-being; we have allowed ourselves to focus on our own glory.” These are the marks of a privileged culture. And yet, in the Advent

preparation, we are calling out ourselves to name we have not been faithful in our focus on Christ. We have not been faithful in seeking the well-being of the community over our own comfort. We have allowed the selfish ambition of the world to cloud even our own judgements towards others.

In the celebration of Christmas, our invitation is not to pat ourselves on our back and say, “look at how well I’m doing. If only everyone else would get their act together, the world would be as God intended in the gift of Christ.” ... This is not the invitation of Christmas, nor our work in this season of Advent.

Christmas is the reminder that we are each broken – that we all have work to do – that there is no one of us who is less redeemable by God than the next, but that we are all in need of redemption. Christ was *not* sent so that we might applaud how other’s might finally get it right. Christ was sent such that each of us in our own brokenness might receive the promise that we might be made whole, that we might receive God’s incarnate love in a way that offers us true healing. Christmas is the celebration of a greater promise of justice and peace to reign over all the earth, but that celebration is not isolated from our own healing. The promise of justice and peace to reign over all the earth begins with the promise that Christ is sent to redeem me – that I might be filled with justice and peace. This is the hope worth longing for at Christmas – it is not just some grand plan for all of creation to be in order – but that God has a plan for me – God has a desire for me to know true peace – that God has a desire for me to know true healing – that God has a desire for me to know true love. God’s love. God’s redeeming love. God’s eternal love. God’s Incarnate love.

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to reign in us forever, that we – you and I – that we might receive the gift of goodness this Christmas – that even your sins and mine – your pain and mine – your fears and mine – might be healed that as one, we might live into God’s eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Dennis Bratcher. Crivoice.org. Retrieved December 18, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Martha Sterne. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bratcher.

^{iv} Bratcher.