

Country singer Tracy Lawrence recorded a number of hits, mostly in the 1990's. But one of my favorite songs of his was recorded two years ago. The song is "Good Ole Days." It's actually a quartet with Brad Arnold and Big & Rich joining in.

The thesis of Tracy Lawrence's "Good Ole Days" is that we have an overly romanticized view of the past, and that that can interfere with our enjoyment of the present. And one day in the future, the song says, we'll look back on our lives now, and view them fondly with the golden glow of nostalgia.

The song says,

*We don't remember how we hated, the taste of that first beer*

*And everything looks better looking in the review mirror...*

*We don't know till it's too late, we're living in the good ole days*

*When we're young, we wanna be older*

*When we're old, we wanna be cool*

*We can't wait to graduate and when we graduate*

*We just wanna go back to school*

*Yeah, we're always talkin' 'bout the thrill of yesterday*

*And that just means tomorrow, we'll be talking 'bout today*

*We don't know till it's too late...*

*These were the good ole days*

The warm glow of nostalgia can be a double-edged sword. Our good memories of the past can be comforting. But focusing too much on the past can hamstring us and get in the way of life in the present. Yearning for the good old days can mess up our living of life today.

That's the theme of our OT lesson from the Prophet Haggai. First, 2 quick pieces of Haggai trivia:

Haggai is the 2<sup>nd</sup> shortest book in the OT. Obadiah, the shortest, is 21 verses long. Haggai comes in 2<sup>nd</sup> shortest at 38 verses long.

Haggai is also very unusual in that we can date it very specifically. Many biblical dates are pure guesswork, especially OT dates. Sometimes you're lucky to get in the right century, let alone the right decade. But Haggai can be dated with laser beam precision. This prophet delivers 4 messages to the people of Jerusalem. The one we read as our OT lesson today dates specifically to October 17, 520 B.C.

Haggai is dealing with a very narrow historical problem, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Here's the setting. 67 years earlier, Jerusalem was invaded. The temple was destroyed. The people were carried off into exile in Babylon. And they would remain captive in Babylon for 49 years.

But then, there was a power shift. Babylon was defeated by Persia. And the Persian Emperor allowed the Jews to return home, if they wished. But it was only a small remnant that decided to make the trip, only a few thousand people. And it was that small, pitiful remnant that started the process of rebuilding their country and their capital city of Jerusalem.

By the time we get to Haggai, the people have been back for a couple of decades. They've rebuilt their houses. They've gotten some commerce going again.

Yet, the Temple of the Lord is still in ruins. That's the charge against the people early in Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house (this Temple) lies in ruins?"<sup>1</sup> That question spurs the people to action.

So they set about the task of rebuilding the Temple. But they're a small group. When Solomon built the original Temple, he had a huge army of skilled laborers. And it took that huge number of workers 7 years to build the original Temple. What could this pitiful remnant do? Actually, all they could really do was to basically take the old stones of the Temple and start stacking them up again.

Which is where we pick up with Haggai today. It's about 7 weeks into the rebuilding process, and the people are obviously demoralized about how shabby the new Temple is. Haggai names their feelings, "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?"<sup>2</sup>

In other words, 'Some of you old-old-timers who remember Solomon's Temple from 67 years earlier must think this new version of the Temple looks pitiful. Compared to its former glory, it looks like nothing.'

And truly, in comparison, it really must have seemed like a bunch of children's building blocks stacked up together. It must have been depressing.

Yet, Haggai doesn't leave the people in their despondency. He says, "Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel (the governor)... take courage, O Joshua... the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD."<sup>3</sup>

The message from God is don't be depressed. 'Be encouraged Governor. Be encouraged High Priest. Be encouraged all my people.' No, the new Temple will not be anywhere near as nice as the one that was destroyed. But be encouraged. Do what you can with what you have. Use what God gives you now to do his work, now. Don't compare it to the past. Move forward in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> Haggai 1:4

<sup>2</sup> Haggai 2:3

<sup>3</sup> Haggai 2:4a

Haggai continues, "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."<sup>4</sup> Notice that. "I am with you... My spirit abides among you."

That's the important part. God's presence makes all the difference. It's not the aesthetic beauty of the Temple that matters most. The Temple is simply a place where the people can gather together in God's presence to worship him.

The most important thing is not the opulence of the building. It's not the number of people who are worshipping in the building. It's not how the temple looks compared to the way it looked in the past. No. The most important thing in the present is the presence of the Living God.

That's the message from God. 'I'm in charge. It's my presence that makes the difference.'

Then there's a comforting message that takes just a bit of unpacking.

You may recognize it as a part of Handel's *Messiah*. It's the first thing sung the bass soloist. In the version we read this morning:

"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."<sup>5</sup>

The gist of what God is saying is, 'I will act. I will shake things up. I will draw people in. I will fill the Temple with my splendor.'

And then God makes the promise, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts."<sup>6</sup>

God is basically saying, 'The new Temple may not look as pretty as the old one. But I will use it to draw people in. And I will be present there. And because of my presence, the smaller shabbier Temple will actually be more splendid than the larger original Temple.'

God is telling his people, 'Don't get stuck in the past. Be present in the present, because I am present with you.'

Notice God is not saying, 'Ignore the past.' After all, he called to mind the past promises he made in Egypt with the Jewish people.

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<sup>4</sup> Haggai 2:4b-5

<sup>5</sup> Haggai 2:6-7

<sup>6</sup> Haggai 2:9

But he is saying, 'Don't get caught up in the trap of looking back on the past with such nostalgia, such longing that you're paralyzed in the present.' Do what you can now with what you have now.

Those reminders are so important for us. As Christians, and especially as Episcopalians, we have deep roots in the past. Every week we gather together and proclaim our past: "On the night before he died for us, Jesus took bread." It's not a matter of ignoring our past.

But it's important to not get stuck looking with envy, looking with such longing at the past that you're no good in the present.

Because in this life, there are cycles. Circumstances ebb and flow. Sometimes you're on top of the hill, and at other times you're at the bottom. And if you get caught up in the trap of saying, "Man, I wish I could go back to the good old days," then you're in danger of not living in the present where God has placed you.

And that goes for St. Paul's as well. We are nine years into our 2<sup>nd</sup> century of ministry in Lubbock. And things in our second century look quite a bit different from our first century.

We're no longer part of a culture where you're automatically expected to be Christian just because you're American. We're no longer part of a culture where Sunday morning is sacred time—it has become like any other day of the week.

The Episcopal Church is not enjoying the rapid cycles of growth we had at times in the past. In fact, all Christian denominations are shrinking, ours included.

But then again, we've had a number of new folks become part of our community. God is still drawing people to St. Paul's

And we're far more intentional about our welcome than we once were.

I hear all the time from visitors how our music and our worship are glorious offerings to God.

And there is still much need in the community around us. There are many people around us hurting and hungering physically. And there are many people around us hurting and hungering spiritually. And we have something we can offer them.

"My Spirit abides among you," says the Lord, "do not fear."

God is not finished with St. Paul's. We have much work yet to do.

So take courage, people of St. Paul's, do not be afraid. God is present with us.

Let us do what we can with what we have. Use what God gives us now to do his work, now.

"Work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts."

God is telling us, 'Seek to do my will, draw closer to me, support and serve each other, carry my love from this altar to those in desperate need of my love.' "Then the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former," says the Lord of Hosts.

My Spirit abides among you.  
Do not fear.