

COME, LORD JESUS! OH, WAIT ... HE'S ALREADY HERE

Sermon, November 6, 2022

Texts: Haggai 1:13 – 2:9; Luke 20:27-38, II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

In attempting to follow the Revised Common Lectionary readings, I've at times wondered what common "thread" weaving through the texts was perceived by those who plan the readings. At first, I just could not see any such connection in today's readings, but I think I eventually hit on it: All three passages have a common theme of a future hope that sustains and inspires us in the present ... a promised Hope that is yet to come, and of how that hope (more precisely, the Giver of that hope) meets, motivates and sustains us in the immediate present.

In the Gospel text, Jesus affirms the grand hope of life beyond the grave in His encounter with the Sadducees, and by implication, spells out how that hope is a present reality. As we are told in today's reading, the Sadducees did not believe in life beyond the grave. They were convinced the afterlife is nowhere mentioned in any of the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, which was their sole scriptural authority. As I've mentioned before when we've looked at this passage, I think that's why they are called Sadducees ... they had no hope in life after death, so they were Sad, You See!

Trying to trip Jesus up, these Sadducees pose this rather absurd question to Him. You know the story ... this woman marries, her husband dies; she marries his brother, he dies; she marries another brother, he dies and so on through all seven of the brothers ... instead of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (*a popular musical that came out the year I was born!*), we have *one* bride for seven brothers. My first thought is, "*Men, stay away from that woman!*" Seven times a widow! But that's beside the point ... what the Sadducees want to know, at least theoretically, is, "*Whose wife will she be in heaven?*"

Jesus answers their immediate question in a way that I'll have to save for some other sermon, but He then goes on to use this opportunity as a teaching moment. He uses this opportunity to affirm the hope-full reality of life beyond the grave by citing an authority the Sadducees will accept ... from Exodus, one of the five books of Moses, about the Lord's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. In that encounter God said, "*I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*" Present tense. Not, "*I was the God of Abraham when he was alive,*" but "*I am the God of Abraham.*" So Jesus is inferring and asserting, "*You Sadducees think this life is all there is, BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are very much alive and in God's immediate presence, AS ARE WE. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living!*"

In our lectionary text from the Old Testament, the people had been back from the Babylonian exile, now, about eighteen years. Zerubbabel and Joshua began organizing the daunting work of finishing the rebuilding of the destroyed Temple. (*I provided a little background prior to the reading of the text: When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian armies in 586 BC, the holy temple in Jerusalem that had stood nearly four centuries was leveled, and the Jewish people were carried off into captivity. For @ fifty years, they lived as captives in Babylon, then Babylon fell to Persia. King Cyrus of the Persians let the Hebrews return to their devastated homeland and they began work on restoring the temple. However, as you can read in the book of Ezra, political intrigue and subterfuge more or less stopped the rebuilding effort. Haggai enters the picture 18 years after that; King Darius was now the Persian monarch, and Darius decreed the completion of the Temple, even supplying materials and financing. The Second Temple was eventually completed 516 BC, 70 years after the first temple's destruction.*) As we read in chapter 2; v. 3, God says: "*Ask the people, 'Who of you is left who saw this Temple in its former glory?' How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?*" Those few who did remember the original Temple built by Solomon had to be well into their seventies and eighties by now, and they had to know there was no way they could match the old Temple ... they didn't have the rich extravagances of Solomon, with his professional craftsmen, the imported woods and huge quantities of gold. Also, that was another time, another era, a time when the nation was strong, prosperous, and the vast majority of the people were fervently faithful and eager to honor God. Now, the nation is devastated; they are few, relatively poor and with limited resources. How discouraging it must have been for those who remembered the glory days. How daunting the rebuilding task appeared. Yes, to them, the Temple would never be the same again.

To slightly paraphrase, imagine God saying through the prophet, "*Ahh, so you remember what this Temple was like before. You may long for how things used to be. You may be thinking it will never be the same again. AND YOU'RE RIGHT. It won't ever be the same again. It will be DIFFERENT. In fact, one day the glory of the new Temple will far surpass that of the old. Don't be discouraged! Stop spending time and energy remembering the glory days, stop with the lamenting and go to work!*" A quick aside: that Temple imagery is also a veiled prophecy of the New Temple to come in Jesus Christ, one made up of "living stones," a Temple that will extend throughout the world, a "place" in which God's Spirit dwells, with Christ as the cornerstone. The body of Christ ... the church ... is that Temple in which God's Spirit dwells and fills the whole world, bringing the good news of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. You and I are living stones in that temple of God. But that's another sermon, which is coming in two weeks.

Three times God says in verse 4 ... *"Be strong ... be strong ... be strong ...* and then He says, *"Go to work! FOR I AM WITH YOU."* There's the promise. There's the hope. *"For I AM WITH YOU."* Yes, there's the far off promise and hope of a greater Temple to come, but that immediate promise ... that's what the people needed to hear. They needed to hear, *"Do not let the great disappointments and ruins of life distract you from the greater promises of God. Do not let the present pains, the hardships, the losses cause you to forget God stands beside you to bring you through! Do not let nostalgic yearning and longing for some glorious past discourage you and sap your energy for the present; GO TO WORK in the midst of how it is, with what you got, in the time you have and work hard to make good memories and a solid religious heritage for those who do not have the wonderful memories and opportunities you may have had! Yes, the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises may be on a far distant horizon. And yes, there may be a long time between here and now and then and there. But the living God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac promises, 'I AM WITH YOU NOW.' So, go to work! For your own good and for the good of those you love!"*

Essentially, this is also Paul's message to the struggling young church in Thessalonica. We can only look at this briefly, but the particular challenge for that young church was that some were teaching Jesus had already come back and that the Thessalonians had somehow missed out, they got "left behind." That meant for them all the hardships they were experiencing, including the persecutions they were enduring, was simply the way it was and would ever after be. *"Do not be shaken or alarmed,"* writes Paul. *"The Lord hasn't returned yet."* He goes on to say in so many words, *"The day of the Lord is coming, and the rebellious and lawless one behind all of this is destined for destruction on that day. That day will come. Yes, come, Lord Jesus! But wait... Jesus is already here! By His Spirit He is with you and at work in you to make you His faithful people. You will share in His Glory, now and forever!"* Paul reminds the Thessalonians, and us: Jesus is with us in this life, and there is *more* to life than this life, so stand firm. Yes, Jesus is coming, but don't forget ... He's also already here. So, let's be strong, be strong, be strong ... and get to work! *(And vote accordingly on Tuesday, by the way ... use your vote to support those who you believe stand for what is right and good!)* For God is with us! Now!

(Due to time constraints, I made an "audible" and did not include the paragraphs below ... as it was, the service ran overtime even with the shortened, edited-on-the-spot sermon. I'll include my prepared text below, but on Sunday wrapped it up with this illustration I had used in an earlier 2020 sermon: "Author and speaker Josh McDowell once wrote about visiting with a corporate executive who was asked, 'What's your purpose in life?' The executive replied, without blinking an eye, 'My purpose is to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I can!' I like that. Basically, that was why that executive strove to excel in all areas of life, so that he would be an attractive force drawing as many people as possible to think about heavenly things ... his future hope gave him present purpose, and filled him with the immediate motivation to excellence.)

Our worship services begin with a prelude. Not with an invocation. Then we have a Call to Worship and a Prayer of Adoration *(or a psalm that serves both purposes, like this morning)*. But, no invocation. There's a reason for that. The dictionary defines "invocation" thus: *(a) the act or form of calling for the presence or the assistance of some superior being. (b) conjuring; calling up a spirit (c) A call or summons; especially, a judicial call, demand, or order; as, the invocation of papers or evidence into court. (d) to bring something in from without.* The act of praying an invocation might convey the wrong impression, that God is somewhere far away and/or "out there" and we need to get His attention. No, He is with us! He is closer to us than the air we breathe. And He is very attentive to us! We're the ones who need to be called to attention, not God. Rather than an invocation: *"God, we invite you here among us"*, a better prayer might be, *"We know we do not have to request Your presence, because there is nowhere You are not. So we celebrate the fact You are already here with us now."*

As old Jonah certainly learned, there truly is nowhere we can go to flee God's presence ... so, why do we act like His attendance is somehow intermittent? Why do we assume it's dependent on us to somehow get His attention, to get Him to show up? Our tendency is to think of heaven as somewhere out there or up there, the place where God watches from a distance and hopefully we will one day join him. But for the biblical writers, heaven is close. In fact, "heaven" is also a term used in the Bible to describe the Earth's atmosphere. Yes, the blue sky looks far away and "up there;" in reality, though, where is it? If the atmosphere was just "up there", we'd suffocate! The air of our atmosphere is all around us and very near. So, when Jesus describes the invisible (but very real) realm God inhabits, He lets us know it's not only "out there" or "up there", but it is also as near as the air we breathe and the atmosphere surrounding our bodies. We don't have to *invoke* God's presence.

We only have to *attend* to it, to turn to it, to tune in to it. We don't have to capture God's attention ... in fact, the exercises of discipleship *(worship, prayer, singing, Bible study)* are all ways of letting God capture *our* attention. We are the ones whose attention needs to be captured, we are the ones who have drifted away, we are the ones who need to be called to worship. We don't have to summon God from another country or another dimension or another galaxy. We don't have to wait until He comes again with glory.

So, be strong, be strong, be strong ... and get to work! For God is with us.

Yes, "Come, Lord Jesus" ... but don't forget: He's already here.