



"It's Been a Year"

A sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Rev. Brett Harris

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Haggai 2:1-9

One of my favorite comedians is Pete Holmes. Do you know him? I first got to know him through his conversations with folks like Richard Rohr, Greg Boyle, and Rob Bell. Whether you know him or not, he's also got a great bit about how much he hates New Year's. He rants about how we act like every day, every moment isn't one year since something else happened, but we choose this arbitrary moment in the dead of winter to mark the occasion and throw all our eggs into what will be different moving forward from that day. We could choose literally any day to be different or find the courage and the will to do something new, but we put all of our "new year, new me" energy into January 1.

Every day can be the start of something new.

As I thought about what to share with you this morning and as I've listened for the spirit's movement, I've been sitting with the reality that last week marked our annual moment of remembrance for those whom we've lost in the last year, the saints who've joined that great cloud of witnesses, and this week marked one year since the election that brought the chaos of the last year to life.

It's been a year, hasn't it? I don't know about you but it's been difficult to withstand the onslaught of upheaval the last year has brought to my community and to yours and to our nation. I've had friends fear leaving their homes for weeks and months, unsure that the documentation they have to be in the United States will be honored.

I've talked with parents who were hoping and praying their children's passports would be finalized or renewed quickly enough that if they needed to provide proof of their residence at school, they would have what they needed.

I've had friends laid off with little to no notice because of lost or restructured federal funding. The national guard from my own state was sent to DC to keep it beautiful while infants and children lost their access to WIC and SNAP back home.

And to be fair the last year hasn't all been bad.

My dad turned 80 and our family, siblings, cousins, everyone, got to be together in California. My wife hosted a huge fundraiser to support early childhood education in Mississippi with Morgan Freeman as the keynote speaker. I got to give the centennial lecture commemorating one of my theological mentors, Will Campbell, at

the University of Southern Mississippi. A friend got his green card. My oldest son got his first lead in a play. We took our kids to England. Y'all celebrated 30 years of partnership with your friends in Cuba.

A lot has happened in the last year. It's been a year. I imagine if you look back on your last twelve months, you'll find how much you've enjoyed and endured in the last year too. But when we look at our world and what we know is happening to our neighbors and friends and our nation, I think we can agree that we aren't where we want to be.

This world of manufactured gridlock, compassionless government, and a fleeting and hazy sense of hope found in glimpses here and there, isn't where we want to be.

I think we can all agree this next year needs to bring about some change, some more good news, some justice, some peace.

But I think where we diverge is our response to the question: Where do we go from here? How do we get there? What is God saying to us in this moment?

We have to ask ourselves: Are we longing to go back or itching to move forward?

The folks in Judah were in the same place.

After nearly 70 years in exile, the Babylonian empire had recently fallen, and the Persian ruler Darius had welcomed the Jews to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. And when they did turn their attention to the Temple, they became disheartened as they saw that it was not Solomon's majestic temple.

They were despondent and disheartened. And then, on this very specific day, the 21st day of the 7th month (which also happens to be the month in which Jews celebrate their high holy days - Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, and Sukkot, the annual harvest festival), God speaks to Haggai and tells him what to share with them.

I love what God tells Haggai to say to the people after they've just reflected on the previous year and entered a new one. Feeling the way they feel.

"Take courage, Zerubbabel. Take courage, Joshua. Take courage all you people of the land. And work, for I am with you."

God knows where they are. God speaks to them individually and collectively. God senses their frustration with their lack of progress and their inability to recreate the Temple they once knew. God knows they want to rebuild, and wants to convince them that what they will build anew will be better than everything before. God can tell they are slipping into nostalgia's trap and God knows that nostalgia is the enemy of hope.

So, God reminds them of what they've forgotten. God hearkens them back not to some rose colored past, but to the promise God made to them coming out of Egypt: I am with you. Do not fear.

All they had to do in response, is get to work...And they did. And they built a new Temple, started a new chapter, began a new year with God by their side.

Take courage and work. That's it.

No matter what has happened during the last year or the last decade or for our entire lives, everything from here on out can be better than any memory we might have of what we've lost.

Pining for the past won't get us anywhere and neither will burying our heads in the sand and waiting for another election or a new boss or a sunny day to get started.

If we can just find the courage, we need to get up again and the willingness to do our part, our work, to make it so.

It's amazing to me what we can do when we get to work. When we forget about reliving or relitigating the past and start moving toward that brighter future God has in store for all of us together.

And you were a part of some of that work this summer, weren't you?

You knew full well that the trajectory of our nation's relationship with Cuba has been deteriorating after a brief period of hope some years ago, but you clung to the hope of the future and the courage and determination of your friends across the Gulf. And with a little bit (maybe a lot...) of work, you said we can make the future better and brighter. You did something that I think we all hope will be repeated in building up the resources and capacity and confidence of our friends in Cuba.

You took courage and got to work.

Courage also doesn't always have to have an international impact. Courage might look like Michael Woolf, an Alliance pastor in Evanston, Illinois, who was shot in the leg this week while standing up for his immigrant neighbors. He was peacefully protesting in his clerical collar and asking sincere questions when an Illinois State Police officer fired.

He took courage and got to work.

Courage also doesn't always require enduring physical harm.

My family lives in a strange part of south Mississippi—once the Free State of Jones which seceded from the secession because a bunch of poor white farmers didn't want to fight the plantation owners' war that is now also a tourist destination thanks to HGTV. It keeps my head on a swivel, and we tend to respond to any mention of politics with "It's a mess" or another favorite comedian of mine, Alex Edelman's go-to phrase, "Can you believe it?"

But when funding for WIC and SNAP dried up last week, my wife couldn't keep quiet because she knew babies and toddlers would go hungry, so she shared what she knew on the internet. And there was an outcry...that we couldn't let this happen to our babies. Folks we know we disagree with on a heap of issues shared what she had written, and folks started texting, asking what they could do to help. And money flowed to our local food bank and feeding ministries.

It was a little glimmer of hope that maybe we can build a better future

Like the people in Judah, we have a choice in this moment, in our world.

We can take courage, be strong, and get to work so God can lead us in building a new and better and brighter future for our neighbors and ourselves OR

We can fall into fear and complacency and nostalgia and wait to make a change while our world gets passed around between emperors and empires instead of transforming it into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The choice is clear, right?

Take courage and get to work.

In his reflection on the Lord's Prayer, Will Campbell warns us, "Our wish is for the things we desire. Our hope is in the Lord." As we mark this arbitrary moment of a year of enduring uncertainty and chaos, let's not wish for things to change. Let's take courage, be strong, and get to work for our hope is in a God who is always with us.

Amen.