

I Know Who Holds the Future
Haggai 2:1-9, Luke 20:27-38
November 6, 2022
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At the session retreat that we had out at Camp Montgomery at the beginning of the year, I gave everyone a little box with some spare change in it and a butterfly sticker on the lid, and we used it as a starting point for a conversation about change. Pennies were representative of small change. In the context of church, penny changes might be something like changing the font in the bulletin or the color of the choir robes. In your daily life it might be something like switching from coffee to tea or giving yourself an earlier bedtime. Quarters represented bigger change. Again, in our church context, a quarter change might be something like getting a new music director or going from two services at 8:30 and 11 to one service at 10 am. In your own life, a quarter change might be starting college, or moving to a new city, or retiring from your career.

I shook the change in the box to make the point that change often makes noise. It creates a buzz and gets people talking about their feelings and opinions. Sometimes the noise sounds like happiness and excitement. Other times it sounds like grumbling and complaining. Many times when there is a change, you can hear the sound of both.

Some of the boxes had a lot of change in them which made them heavier. It doesn't seem like a little bit of change would make that much of a difference, but I can always tell that my purse feels heavier when a bunch of change has collected in my wallet, and when we experience a lot of change in our lives and circumstances all at once, or maybe a series of changes one right after the other, it adds up and can feel heavy and hard to bear. Part of what was so difficult about the Covid pandemic was that we all experienced so much change at one time. We had to stay home, and change the way we worked, and get used to wearing masks, and we couldn't celebrate holidays the way we always had, and we couldn't come to church – not even on Easter that first year. It was a lot, and it felt very heavy and hard to bear.

I pointed out that some of the coins in the boxes were blackened and dull, while others were shiny and pristine. A reminder that change can be ugly, but it can also be beautiful.

And finally, I pointed out that you can use your change to buy things. Change gives you the ability to have something that you didn't have before. You can buy a pack of gum or a soda with your pocket change. Moving to a new city gives you the chance to add new friends to your life that you wouldn't have known otherwise. Changing your diet or cutting out a bad habit can potentially give you years of life that you wouldn't have had without making the changes. Changing where you sit can reveal a view you haven't seen or open up the door to a new friendship. Changing your goals can help you achieve things you've never achieved before. In the church, or at work, or in other organizations, changes in leadership bring new gifts and talents and perspective that deliver new new outcomes. This is partly why we elect a new class of elders every year- so that we can benefit from the gifts and strengths of lots of people and not just the same few.

After talking about these things with the elders, the question was, how do you feel about change? I know there are some people that thrive on change, but probably most of us find that change and going through times of transition feels hard and there are lots of reasons for that. One is that change – especially big change- often involves grief. This is true with transitions in leadership, for example. When someone new comes in – Carl for example- it means that we've had to say goodbye to someone that we know and love,

like Tony. That is hard. It's not just people that we grieve, though. We grieve the loss of patterns and processes that once worked well and had become predictable and comfortable. Doing things the way we've always done them provides a sense of security and certainty that is comforting. Change can also be hard because in the midst of transition, we can't see where we're going exactly. We don't always know how things will end up. We don't know if we can trust the new leader or if the new thing that we're doing is going to work out. We have a hard time imagining something different or better than what we know, so we are tempted to just turn around and go back or to stop where we are and resist moving forward. How could something new really be better than the past that may have been good, but is also so easy to romanticize?

Going through transitions, making changes that we choose, and learning to accept changes that we didn't choose is something that is just part of life and always has been. When it's really uncomfortable or even painful, we might find ourselves wondering why it has to be part of life or we might even be tempted to doubt God's goodness or love, but the one thing that never changes- even if everything else does- is God's goodness and God's love for us. No matter what we might lose and no matter how we might have to adapt, or grow, or accept, God remains the same and Jesus is with us to lead and help us. In the midst of every change and any challenges that come with the change, we can rely on the promise we read in Romans 8:28 which says "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose." This is the good news that we find in our Scripture readings this morning.

Our first reading was from the book of Haggai. Haggai may not be as familiar to you as one of the Gospels or one of the letters like Philipians. It is one of the minor prophets which just means that it is shorter, but not less important, than some of the other prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Haggai was a prophet in the year 520 which was 70 years after Judah had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and God's people had been hauled off into exile. Everything had changed for God's people at that point, as it does when a foreign power comes in and destroys your city and carries you away from your home. By 520, the Babylonians had been defeated by the Persians and the Persian king had given permission for the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives and their city. It was a time of transition as they tried to start over and recover their losses, and they were in the midst of rebuilding when Haggai was delivering his messages from the Lord. The book begins with Haggai challenging the people about their priorities. They had come back to rebuild their city, but they had put rebuilding the Temple behind rebuilding their own homes. Haggai tells them that they haven't prospered since they returned because they had neglected to rebuild the Temple which was God's dwelling place in their midst. He urges them to put first things first and start work on the Temple and the people get inspired to start the work.

When we get to the passage we heard in chapter 2, it's one month later and all of the initial enthusiasm and excitement about rebuilding the Temple had started to wear off in part because what they were building paled in comparison to the glory and splendor of the Temple that had been destroyed. It just didn't seem like the new Temple could or would ever be as good as the old so they started losing interest. They didn't want to build anymore, but Haggai challenged and encouraged them by reminding them that God had promised a wonderful future – a new Jerusalem which would be the center of the coming Kingdom that would include people from every nation who would worship God and live together in peace forever. The Temple that they were building would have an important role as God worked out this plan and delivered this good future, so Haggai told them to have courage and keep building remembering that while it might not seem as great or glorious as what they had experienced in the past, they could trust that God had something good in store and that what they were doing was part of preparing for that future.

He told them to keep building with hope in their hearts for the future and their trust planted firmly in God.

Our Gospel passage is a story about a time that Jesus was questioned by some religious leaders who wanted to trap him and try to expose him as a false teacher. It's a different kind of story, but there is a message here, too, about trusting God with and for the future. The Saducees, who were a sect that didn't believe in a resurrection, thought they had a great trick question that would force Jesus to say that belief in the resurrection was inconsistent with the law of Moses. They made up a scenario about a very unfortunate woman who gets married but her husbands keep dying. The law of Moses said that if a man died before having children, his brother was obligated to marry his wife so that he could give her children and the man's legacy would be preserved. This happens 7 times in their scenario, and they ask who will be her husband if there is a resurrection? The scenario and the question that the Saducees posed to Jesus revealed that they were entrenched in their narrow view of things – this is the way things are and always will be, but in his response, Jesus shows that God is up to something more and bigger than what their limited imaginations had conceived of.

Jesus responded by making a distinction between those who belong to this age and “those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead,” and he used the opportunity to say something about what resurrection life will be like. He describes how the new age will be different. People won't give and be given in marriage because there won't be any need for that kind of relationship. In this age, and especially in that time and culture, marriage provided protection for a woman in a world where women didn't have much status. Even today, marriage is a gift that meets the needs that we have for practical help, and companionship, and intimacy. When Jesus says that there won't be marriage in the new age, he was suggesting that in the age of the kingdom of God, we won't have the same need for marriage that we have in this age. Everything will be different, and we will be cared for in a different kind of way. One commentator says it this way.

“Marriage provides a cradle for the beautiful fragility of human life. However, in the age to come, the burden of death and the fragility of life will be gone. Jesus promises in our future life, we "cannot die anymore" (v. 36). You'll no longer need to be reminded to take your meds, helped up the stairs or encouraged through cancer treatments. The cradle that marriage provides for our fragile human lives will be retired by bodies that are raised imperishable to enjoy an eternal existence.”¹

Jesus's answer to the Saducees was a challenge and an invitation to consider what they hadn't been willing to consider. He spoke to them about the good things that God still has in store, and they were left with a choice. They could cling to their existing worldview and insist that God would only do what they expected God to do, and only care for human needs in the way that they expected God to care for them, or they could open their hearts and minds and believe the truth of what Jesus was saying to them. They could begin to trust that God was holding and preparing something for later, and they could believe that even if things were different that God would go on meeting their needs and do more wonderful things than they could ask for or imagine.

In our own lives, when we are confronted with change, when we fear the future that changes may bring, when we aren't sure that we want to invest in doing a new thing, when we don't know if we can trust God to meet our needs in a new and different way, we have the same choice that the Saducees and the ancient Israelites had. We can dig in our heels, and keep looking backward, and insist on clinging to what we

¹ “A Marriage Not Made in Heaven,” Nov. 10, 2013. Homiletics.

know, and insist on God doing the same things for us in the same way as always *or*, we can believe that God knows what we need. We can trust that God has a good future planned, and that Jesus will help us arrive at the future that God is holding for us if we are willing to follow him. It isn't always easy, but God gives us grace in abundance and Jesus wants to help us in our journey.

Jesus is here with us today and is ready to confirm that all of these things are true as we eat with him at his table. In the Sacrament we are reminded that the Kingdom and life in the Kingdom that we hope for is will be delivered to us, and Jesus gives us the grace and nourishment that we need to help us grow, and change, and keep moving forward in pursuit of God's good and perfect will for our lives and the world. If you are in the midst of some transition in your life, if there is some change going on that you are having a difficult time with accepting, if you aren't sure what Jesus is calling you to do in the midst of the change, bring those questions, and concerns, and uncertainty with you to Jesus's table now. Ask him how he wants to grow you. Ask him to show you how God is working in the midst of the circumstances for your good and for the larger good. Ask him for strength and guidance, and surrender again to his wisdom and love. Commit once again to trusting in the goodness of God and to obeying as Jesus leads. Amen.