

“INNER STRENGTH AND JOY”

**by Dr. Jim Standiford
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**First United Methodist Church
2111 Camino del Rio South
San Diego, California 92108
(619) 297-4366**

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Gracious God, in this season of Kingdومتide, we
pray thy kingdom come and thy will be done, in
each of our lives, as well as in all your earth. Amen.

A first grade teacher presented each of her students with the first half of a well-known proverb and asked them to come up with the remainder of the proverb. Here are some of the results:

Don't change horses...until they stop running.

Strike while the...bug is close.

Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and...you have to blow your nose.

Don't bite the hand that...looks dirty.

If you lie down with dogs...you will stink in the morning.

The good old days were...one little boy said: "My daddy said the good old days were when he was a kid, but then he said he had to walk miles to school, uphill both ways, in the snow...and then I found out he lived in Phoenix! I don't get it."

The good old days aren't always as we remember them.

In the movie, "High Fidelity" John Cusack takes a tour of his old girl friends. What he remembers about them is their beauty, charm, and elegance. However, on this tour he discovers reality is quite different. They are not anything like he remembers. He asks the question, "How did I edit all that out?" In the scrapbooks of our mind we keep only the pretty pictures. The others we throw away. When we think of the good old days we think of the 1950's, and "Leave it To Beaver," but in the 50's we were scared to death of the communists, and built bomb shelters, and had air raid drills at school. The Kennedy presidential years were referred to as "Camelot" yet behind the scenes they were trying to avoid nuclear disaster in the Cuban missile crisis. It was supposed to be a "Pleasantville" world, yet racism, lynchings, and prejudice were widespread. When we look back and think of the good old days we think of unreal pictures of security, economic prosperity, calm, and peace. An older member of the congregation said, "In the good old days we did the stewardship campaign by going out two by two and visited in people's homes to get their pledges. There was nothing good about that." (I would

say to you, we can go back to the good old days, but if you just get your pledge in, we can skip that part.)

The prophet Haggai is dealing with people, the eldest of whom remember the good old days of the first Temple in Jerusalem. Haggai is writing after the Exile, the people have been allowed to return and construction on a new Temple has begun. However, life back in defeated, destroyed Jerusalem is not good. In truth, they might have had it better in Babylon. On top of that, as they seek to construct the new Temple they face not only desolate surroundings, but also poor resourcing, under-funded budgets, insufficient building materials, and inferior craftsmanship. We know the construction efforts were so shoddy that Nehemiah 4:3 reports a fox could demolish the walls by bumping into them. Additionally, the younger members of the community are at odds with the elders since they never saw the first Temple nor do they remember the original Temple rituals, so there is also conflict over religious practices as well. The dominate voice is the lament that things aren't like they used to be.

In this situation, Haggai brings God's word, "Take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts...My spirit abides among you; do not fear." Three times God says, "I am with you." Then God states that he will shake the world and the treasure of all the nations will come. In some versions, "treasure" is translated "desire", the "desire of all the nations will come," meaning the Messiah will come. Charles Wesley captures this understanding in his hymn "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" when he states, "dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart." We cannot forget the past, or we will be doomed to repeat it. But we cannot focus on the past, or we will never see what God is doing now and in the future. We will know joy when our inner strength, our trust in God, lets us focus on seeing God active in the present and future.

In our second passage today, our inner strength is directly addressed. Here, Paul, or one writing in his name, also writes to a troubled people much as did Haggai. There are those outside the church who are persecuting Christians. These are non-believers whose first loyalty is to Rome. They affirm their allegiance to the emperor and not to God. Also there are Jews who want to see the Roman government crush the Christians, to take the heat off of them. There are also some on the fringe of the early church, "enthusiasts" who claim the Messiah has already returned and the church members at Thessalonica have missed out. They are the first century "left behind." All these groups cause great distress among the church members. They question Paul, his teaching, and everything associated with him.

In our passage today, the church is reassured they have not missed the new thing predicted by Haggai, the Messiah, nor have they missed his return. The writer here calls them to stand firm. He states that the Holy Spirit will sanctify them, strengthen them, and sustain them, in the faith as they faithfully serve in Christ's name. How do they faithfully serve? The answer is as Jesus instructed, daily they are to love God and their neighbors. No matter how difficult the situations of life, our calling is always to love God and neighbor. This message is for us today as well.

Today some Christians focus on the second coming of Christ almost to the exclusion of other Christian teachings. There are folks who produce charts and maps and predictions and generally create a frenzy around this teaching. Since the time of Nero, history's villains have been identified as the lawless one, the antichrist. Others, however, have little room in their thinking for the coming of Christ. Yet, the doctrine of Christ's second coming is rooted in every Christian tradition. Every time we take communion we proclaim: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Both the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds affirm that Christ, "...will come again to judge the living and the dead." When placed properly in the context of the whole Christian message, the coming of Christ to the earth in glory is a key part of our trusting in the One who is Alpha and Omega. So we trust that Christ will come and in the meantime it does no good to moan about the good old days. However, it makes an abundant difference to live our faith by loving God and neighbor.

Margaret Wheatley, the professor and author of leadership and organization science, in her work with many people across very different cultures, has learned to define leaders differently than most. She believes "a leader is anyone who is willing to help." Leaders see something that needs to be changed and take the first step to influence the situation in a positive way. A leader is a parent who volunteers in his or her child's school to make it better; or a person who works to bring safe, clean water to a remote village; or a student who refuses to allow a classmate to be bullied. In every corner of the world, no matter how dire the circumstances, people step forward to try to make a positive difference.

If we have ever wondered where the leaders are today, Wheatley thinks we may be looking in the wrong places, at the top, among the powerful. Her contention is we need to be looking around us locally, and at ourselves.

And perhaps even at our children. We have two little sisters in our Sunday school. Their grandparents gave each of them ten dollars for Halloween, which they could spend any way they pleased. The four year old told her mom she wanted to help the poor people so she gave all her ten dollars in the Sunday school offering. The six year old wanted to buy something with her money, but because of her sister's example, she gave half of her money to her sister. Leadership is looking for ways to help.

We need to ask ourselves when and where are we willing to help? Is it possible that when we focus on the good old days we are just evading God's call to us to make today good for the next generation? Is God calling us to turn from whining to witnessing, from complaining to confessing, from looking back wistfully to looking forward winsomely to lead our children to a new experience of Jesus in life? We can do this because the Holy Spirit gives us inner strength and joy, or as the writer of 2 Thessalonians says, "eternal comfort and good hope." Whatever the circumstances of life, let us look forward. Let us do as Paul says, "press on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14), as the Holy Spirit is with us giving us inner strength and joy.