

Haggai 1:1-11 *In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest:*² *This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’”*³ *Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”*⁵ *Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.”*⁶ *You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”*⁷ *This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.”*⁸ *Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord.*⁹ *“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the Lord Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.”*¹⁰ *Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.*¹¹ *I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

“It just doesn’t make sense....” We know 1+1=2. But there are plenty of times in life when the numbers just don’t seem to add up. “He was a good kid from a good family. How did he get hooked on heroin?” *It just doesn’t make sense.* “He was a hardworking family man. They just celebrated their 20th anniversary. How could he just walk out of their lives like that?” *It just doesn’t make sense.* “She took such good care of herself—no family history. Breast cancer? What a mess...” *It just doesn’t make sense.* We like to think, especially when we are young, that life makes a lot of sense. We like to think that there is a law of nature, a scientific breakthrough, or a Google search that will make everything make sense. The older and experienced among us know that there are plenty of times when life obstinately refuses to make sense! What sense is there to the hatred of a Hitler and his concentration camps? The abuse of a child? Sudden sickness after a lifetime of health? *It just doesn’t make sense....*

At least some of the Old Testament Israelites must have been thinking along those lines as they were dragged away into captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem was surrounded and assaulted, their homes torched, their lives going up in smoke, the Lord’s temple a smoldering heap of rubble. Weren’t they supposed to be God’s chosen people? Why the war? Destruction? Death? Deportation? *It didn’t make a bit of sense....* 70 years later when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from captivity, they must have been thinking the same thing. The Holy City of Jerusalem looked like a ghost town, walls and gates broken and crumbling, the temple courts once thronging with people and shaking with the sounds of singing were a mute heap of rubble overgrown with weeds. *It just doesn’t make sense....*

The Israelites of the Prophet Haggai’s day decided to roll up their sleeves and put some sense back into life. Jerusalem’s walls were rebuilt. A new altar was installed on Temple Mount. Soon, they would dig a little deeper and lay the foundations for a brand-new temple. But you know how people are.... They soon lost interest in rebuilding the temple and began to pay attention to building projects that made a lot more sense: Their own houses. Why should they prioritize precious time and shekels building God a house when their own houses needed work too? Because this makes sense: If the Mrs. is happy, then everyone is happy! This makes sense too: We’ll take care of ourselves right now, so that we’ll be in a better position to take care of God’s house later. But you know how people are... The “later” never came. After laying the foundations, almost 15 years went by without any real progress on the temple itself.

That’s where the minor Prophet Haggai—with only two chapters—proclaims a major message that, humanly speaking, doesn’t seem to make a bit of sense: ⁴ *“Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (the temple) remains a ruin?”*⁵ *Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.”*⁶ *You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”*⁷ *This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways.”*⁸ *Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD.*⁹ *“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.”*¹⁰ *Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.*¹¹ *I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands.”*

The Israelites, it turns out, were preaching a sermon about personal priorities with their paneled houses and their procrastination with God’s house. Self-first. God-second. In other words they were saying, *giving to God first doesn’t make a bit of sense.* Do we ever think like the Israelites of old? Charles Schwab tells me that if I “pay myself first” and invest it carefully, I get more money. But if I give money away, I have less money. That’s the way money works right? Or if I prioritize the work of the Lord with FIRSTfruits giving, then that means that every other area of my life will suffer doesn’t it? Or if I give my time, talents, and treasures away—then that means that I have less for myself and what I love? And we all know that the American dream is that I have MORE than mom and dad did.

It’s true. Humanly speaking, giving doesn’t make a bit a sense. It’s also true, that the default mode of our sinful nature is to keep stuff, store stuff, stockpile stuff, even hoard stuff—as we look out for #1. We call it the good life. God calls it greed. We call it being sensible. God calls it sin. That’s hard to hear...but that’s what God says. Did you notice in Haggai’s sermon how the Lord turned our eloquent excuses to not give upside down? *You plant much, and harvest little... Eat and drink, but aren’t satisfied... Clothed, but not warm... Money is placed into a purse with holes... Much, turns out to be little...* Translation:

the people had less, because they gave little. God himself was seeing to that one drought, one holey purse at a time. Think about it: The God that once fed 5,000 hungry stomachs using only a boy's picnic lunch, is the very same God who can insure that a stockpile of stuff won't be able to make ends meet.

Does Haggai's message sober us up this morning? Let's play a game. Try running some Haggai's ideas through some imaginary prayers: "Dear Lord, I thank you that I am able to have the newest SUV on the market and ride around in style while my church and school are considering giving our called workers pay cuts. Amen." Or how about this: "Dear Lord, thank you for allowing me to finally be debt free while church and school remains in hock—sometimes just to make payroll. Amen." "Dear Lord, I thank you for the 4% growth in America's economy. Now if Pastor would just land the plane on this money sermon, that would be great, because I already know in my head that I'm not going to give a plug nickel more—no matter what the Bible says about firstfruits giving. Amen." Somehow those imaginary prayers don't sound quite right when you actually say them out loud. In a not-so-subtle way, we too are preaching a sermon with our paneled houses and our procrastination with God's house and work: *Giving to God first doesn't make a bit of sense.*

Haggai's words make me wonder about two news stories I've heard: American employment has not been this high since the summer of '69. God bless America! Then I heard another news story that money spent on video games was up 40% in the first half of 2018—\$19.5 billion dollars! Record employment. Video games are up 40%. Offerings are not only flat but down significantly. Which makes perfect sense—but only if God isn't in first place in our hearts! It's not that we don't have the money but that our hearts are spending it in other places.

We have come to EXPECT a full-service ministry with church, school, pre-school, and daycare. But can we really expect them to fully function if the paneling of our houses remains our first priority? We have received a vibrant Christian ministry built by the sacrifice of those faithful people who have gone before us. Are we willing to prioritize the Lord's work in order to pass them on to those who would come after us? **Listen:** I practice no scare tactics this morning. And I'm certainly not going to engage in a shallow, sentimental ra-ra session of "do it for Northdale's kids!" I simply tell you the truth: *You get the ministry that you are willing give for.* Next year's ministry plan—staffing levels, programs, funding, etc.—will be based upon how well we give as a family of believers between now and the end of the year. We can only minister with what God's people are willing to give to their ministry.

Now think of this: Do you think that the people who gave generously to the temple in Haggai's day went home and God let them freeze to death? After Haggai's rebuke, why could the Israelites *give so confidently* to the Lord and his work? Because they believed in a God who *gave himself completely* for us! You see: It isn't our giving that makes no sense. It's God's giving that makes no sense! That the Holy One of Israel would give himself completely for the sinful ones of America makes no sense whatsoever. That's why it's called grace. God's grace is simply amazing. Jesus didn't give 10% of himself for you. He was in it 110% for you and your salvation! What dedication to your salvation did it take for Jesus to leave streets of heavenly gold for the cow manure of Bethlehem's barn? How much was Jesus willing to give up for us, not even having a house to call a home or a pillow to plop his head upon! How full is Jesus' sacrifice for your forgiveness as he goes all the way to the cross for you! He didn't swipe a Visa card for you. He shed his precious blood to redeem you and made slaves into sons and daughters!

The One who willingly made himself nothing for us upon the cross is our everything. In Christ, God graciously gives us ALL things! The one who said: "I thirst" is the one who washed you clean in baptism! The one who cried out "Why have you forsaken me" is precisely the one who will never leave you or forsake you! The one who prayed "Give us this day our daily bread" is the same one who opens his hands and satisfies your desires. Should we trust a God like that? No, thank God that we trust a God like that!

This big issue before our Northdale family is this: Is our relationship with the Savior our life's priority? Or is it just another one of life's hobbies? How can you tell? Do this: Go home this week and spend a prayerful 1/2 hour with your last bank statement. Look at the numbers and see if you can spot any priorities they might point out to you. The numbers don't lie. Take the time to pray about what you find—and what you don't find.

Let's open our eyes and see the harvest! We have the opportunity right here in Tampa to reach hundreds and thousands of people who need to hear the Gospel of Jesus. The blessings are there right before our faces! Open your eyes and look around you. There is absolutely no question that the blessings are there, the resources are there for aggressive Gospel ministry. The question is not one of resources, but of our resolve. Where is the Lord and his work on our list of personal priorities? Is he a FIRSTfruits priority? Or is he a leftovers hobby? Will we settle for nice paneled houses? Or do we desire to make a real, eternal difference?

My prayer this morning is Haggai's message opens your heart in a major way this week. To our sinful minds, giving to God doesn't make one bit of sense. But when God and his work takes first priority in your heart, when you trust in God's promises to provide when you are generous with him, when you understand that all of this is his anyway, and when you understand that God wants all of your heart and all of who you are...then it makes perfect sense. You worship a God who knows how to make much into next to nothing because of our greed; but very little into abundance due to his grace. You worship the ultimate Giver. God gave you his first—Jesus, the Firstborn over all creation. God gave you his best—his Son, in whom he is well-pleased. In Christ, God graciously gives you all things. Your God is faithful. Trust him. Bank on his promises. And then get busy—with him as your priority—using what God has given you to be aggressive in Gospel ministry for him! Amen.