

# LIGHT FROM THE LECTIONARY

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Proper 27C

## RCL Readings:

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Ps 145:1-5, 17-21

Luke 20:27-38

## Themes

I always look for connections between the readings. Sometimes they are easy to see but often not. The connections I see between these passages:

1. Haggai speaks of the temple being rebuilt as the center for their worship. Paul mentions the temple here as a seat for the "lawless one," that is, a means to be used for evil.
2. Haggai speaks of God shaking the earth so that the riches and wealth pour into the temple. Paul speaks of the Thessalonian Christians being shaken by the false teachings about the end times.
3. Haggai puts the emphasis on God, on what God is doing and will do. Paul does the same thing. Certain Jesus also does this. The Psalmist focuses on the glory and greatness of God, as well as God's nearness.
4. The epistle and Gospel reading both deal with end time issues, with questions and concerns people have about the future, about life after death, even if there is one. Paul makes it clear that whatever the future holds, God will be in control and be victorious. Jesus says that not even death can take us away from our relationship with God. "God is a God of the living, not the dead, for to him all of them are alive" (Luke 20:38). This verse alone is about all we really need to know anyway, in my way of thinking, about the future.

## Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Very little is known of Haggai. Nothing about his age or family background. We only know he was considered a prophet. We do know considerably more about the time in which he was active. In 586 B.C. Jerusalem had been destroyed, along with the temple Solomon had built. Most of the people had been taken to Babylonian labor camps. But in 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great, Ruler of Persia, conquered the Babylonians. As early as 538, he wrote a decree that allowed exiled peoples to return to their homelands. Some Jews did this, finding their holy city and temple, of course, in ruins. Haggai was active during this time of resettlement. For how long we are not sure. His book itself is just limited, so it seems, through August to December of

520 B.C. It was one of the lowest times in Jewish history as the people faced many obstacles in trying to resettle and make a life for themselves back in their homeland. Haggai is one of several prophets who encouraged the people to set their minds on rebuilding the temple. He believes that the worship of God should be at the center of their lives and the presence of the temple again would help this happen. It would focus their attention, their worship, would unite them, remind them of who they were and whose they were, and remind them by its presence that God was also present with them again. They needed, in other words, a vision. Haggai had one for them. The temple itself would be rebuilt but not completed until 515 B.C.

1:15b-2:1. This gives us a precise date for what Haggai is about to say, that is, October 17, 520 BC, during the second reign of the Persian Ruler Darius. It would be nice if all the writings of the prophets were so dated, but the vast majority are not. The significance of the above date is that it was during one of the great festivals of the Jewish faith - the Feast of Booths, a festival that celebrated the harvest, God's providential care, and the Exodus - an appropriate time for a message of hope, encouragement, and challenge.

2:2. This verse gives names the persons Haggai is commanded to deliver God's message to - Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and to the high priest named Joshua. Zerubbabel had returned to Judah with a sizable group in 538 B.C. He was apparently born in Babylon and may have been born in the Davidic lineage. He was apparently given his authority by the Persians. The Joshua here is the grandson of Seraiah, the chief priest who was killed when Jerusalem fell in 586/87 B.C. So with these they continued in a way the high priestly and Davidic lineage as best they could. To these is added "the remnant of the people," that is, those who had come back from Babylon who were the ones to do most of the work at rebuilding the temple. So Haggai is sent to the leaders and the people. The irony is that there were probably very few of these leaders or the people who had even seen Jerusalem except in the words and memories of their parents and grandparents.

2:3. This verse addresses some of the complaints of the people. Some 60 years had passed since the destruction of the Solomon Temple and maybe some of the people did remember seeing it or at least descriptions of it. The rebuilding had already begun (perhaps a month of work), however, it did not look like much, especially in comparison to the former one. People were getting discouraged when they compared what was to what had been. Perhaps some had even opposed the rebuilding of it and now had further ammunition to say, "Better not to have one at all than that monstrosity!" In a sense, what we see here is the older generation actually discouraging the younger one. "This will never measure up to what we did and had." Haggai openly addresses their concerns, challenging them to have faith in what God was doing and would do.

2:4-5. Haggai brings out the big guns here, the heart of his theology as it had been passed down for generations - that no matter how bad it looked now, God was with them, first and foremost, and that should be enough in itself. So they should not be fearful (why they were fearful is not known, except the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple might have posed a threat to some surrounding nations who were threatening action if completed). So they are to take courage and keep on working. God was with them and would see them through it all.

Haggai sounds very much like a cheerleader or at least a morale officer. He will not let them get or stay discouraged. He keeps them focused on the goal and on God.

2:6-9. But Haggai does not stop with the promise of God's presence. He goes on to say that God is planning great things for them once again. They experienced great things at the hands of God in the past, like the Exodus, and, yes, the building of the temple under Solomon. But that should encourage rather than discourage them. God did it then and God can do it again, even greater things. Haggai does seem to see this in very materialistic ways. He seems to promise them that the new temple will be as great if not greater than the former one; that the nation would be as great as it had been under David and Solomon, with wealth pouring into it from all over. But was it this temple he had in mind or one to come? This nation or one of future generations? One thing was for certain - without a temple now, even a common one compared to the former, they would never get to a grander one in the future. I think Haggai is really saying that the people and leaders must continue to work and in their work, in their continued faith God would do marvelous things, even if it seemed so little and frail now.

I think, as a Christian, that Haggai's vision did come true. But it's not the Herod Temple that I have in mind - but the temple of the church. Surely the people of God, the church, is the greatest of all temples. Spiritual riches have filled it in so many ways, so that they overflow now into all the world.

#### **Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21**

This psalm is one that Haggai could have used in his worship or sermon that day. It speaks so powerfully of focusing on God and God's power, God's majesty. Hard to sink into discouragement when you have such a vision of God. But it also speaks of God being "near," of this wondrous God being right there for the people. Haggai and the Psalmist knew that this was the only true and effective remedy for a discouraged people who thought all their best days were behind them. Such a vision gives renewal to their spirits, their desire to work, and their vision and hope for what God can and will do, even though there are such limitations and challenges at the present.

#### **2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17**

The Thessalonians were afraid and confused. Persons from within and without, claiming superior knowledge, apparently had been teaching them all kinds of things about the "day of the Lord" or what many refer to as the "second coming of Christ," which the Bible simply calls the "parousia," which means the "appearance" of Jesus. In other words, just like today, there were many saying the end times were upon them or that it had already happened. Some may have even been saying them things in the name or authority of Paul and the other apostles. So Paul has to write and tell them not to believe any of it, to instead remember the things he had already shared with them, being very wary of those who wish to add to it.

This is certainly something we can identify with in our time. One of the best selling series of books is on this very topic or at least the views of the writers in Left Behind. Some among the Thessalonians were indeed afraid that they or their deceased loved ones were left behind. There were people among them, self-proclaimed experts or teachers of prophecy who took advantage of these fears, even if they were well intended. Not satisfied with what Paul had

said about this topic, and Paul wrote precious little about it, he apparently had talked with them about this at some length, they felt compelled to add to it. Much of his two letters to them deal in some way with this topic. So Paul writes once again to warn them about these persons and their views and to try to answer some of their questions and concerns. His point is the same - that this is not something that should cause them fear or undue anxiety, but that they should concentrate on being disciples, on being the church. This matter had distracted them, as we will see, to the point that some (see next lesson for Pentecost 24) had even stopped work, for why work if the end is coming anyway.

There have always been those like these "teachers" who thought they knew more than anyone else. Some, as Neibuhr says, "Know the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell." They base their views or try to on the Bible or at least a few Bible passages that they have interpreted in certain ways. Because they claim to know these things and to base their views on Scripture, lots of people listen to them. Have you ever noticed that falsehood often comes in the garb of truth by some very smart and refined teachers and writers? The Left Behind series has sold millions of copies, spawned one movie with surely more to come. People are interested in the future, uncertain about it, fearful. Anyone who claims to know will get some hearing. So the wise words of Paul here are, as usual, most timely. For this is a topic that most mainline pastors and churches have stayed away from like the plague. We have been willing to leave it to a fringe group within Christianity. It really is time that we addressed it, not just condemned those whose view we may find unacceptable if not outright wrong. This is as good a text to use for this as any. It would behoove the teacher/preacher to read up on this topic and provide some sound teaching about it through a sermon, a series of sermons, or a Bible study. I would suggest to you, **BREAKING THE CODE**, a good book and video series by Bruce Metzger on the Book of Revelation. He covers this topic in a thorough and easy to understand manner. I have taught it twice and it has had good results. It's available from Cokesbury.org.

Paul pretty much tells them to ignore everything they have heard from these people. Else they will just end up being deceived and more confused than ever. He tells them that the end will not come until certain things happen. Let's look at what he says, although we cannot be certain here that we fully understand what Paul means. But it is clear that Paul is saying two things - that this day had not in fact already happened and is not imminently as some were claiming. These teachings were shaking the church and causing undue agitation. Certain things had to happen first and these had not. But beyond all of this, the most helpful thing Paul is saying here is that they are called to some discernment and critical thinking themselves, to weigh these things in light of the truth they have been taught, not merely accept them because someone who is supposed to be an expert says to them. They can think for themselves. Nonetheless, Paul does go on to share his understanding of some the things that must happen before the end comes. But he is still vague, unspecific. He refuses to name names or make predictions.

First, Paul sees a rebellion that comes. Paul believed that before the end there would be a general rebellion against God or Christ or the church. But there has always been such a force in the world. Paul seems to have in mind a concentrated force that has been growing.

Second, this rebellion will reveal the "lawless one," the one who is "destined for destruction." This rebellion against God has been fueled in secret by this shadowy figure called "the lawless one" or other names like "The Man of Sin" or "The Son of Perdition" or even "The Anti-Christ." This figure is truly anti-christ as he is the exact opposite of Christ, seeking to exalt himself, a kind of devil incarnate as Jesus had been God incarnate. Paul stood within a long line of thinkers who believed that evil and good were at war with one another and would one day have it out in a cosmic battle. Just as there was a Christ, the champion of God and good, it stood to reason that there was also an Anti-Christ, one who opposed everything good and holy. But note here that Paul says this lawless one's fate is already sealed. Even this is something they should not fear. The war has already been decided.

Third, this lawless one will exalt himself as God, even placing his throne in the "temple of God." The reference to his setting himself up in the temple, presumably the one in Jerusalem, has caused all kinds of speculation and is the topic of the next book in the Left Behind series. Is Paul talking about a literal throne set up there or is this a figurative way of talking about this person as an usurper, as one who claims divinity in the place of God? Several rulers over the decades had threatened to do this (Roman rulers) and Antiochus even did it and it led to the Maccabean Revolt even before the Romans. If Paul literally meant the temple, then there's a problem - the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D. (But I wonder if Paul is not thinking here about Emperor worship, which is the background for the Book of Revelation, as the Christians under threat of death or even worse were being forced to bow down to a statue of Caesar and say, "Caesar is Lord.") So you will find in lots of "teachings" about this the necessity for the temple to be rebuilt so that this can happen. Indeed, it is bothersome to me that one of the main reasons why some on the Religious Right are so supportive of Israel is that they see its existence a necessary to fulfill such views of the end times.

Needless to say, this figure has been popular in certain circles and all kinds of guesses have been made about his (or could it be a her?) identity. There is so much vagueness even in the Bible and speculation over this character that I seriously doubt we can ever discern anything much of value from it, except the knowledge that evil is alive and well in our world, always has been. There is a destructive force in the world largely because it comes from within human beings, not outside us. The vast amount of suffering in our world has come from our own rebellion against God and our subsequent inhumanity to one another. To project all of this on one figure might make sense as a way of trying to understand or cope with evil, to personify it, but it more times than not distracts us from looking in the mirror and seeing the real "lawless ones." How freeing it is to say, "The devil made me do it," freeing from responsibility and moral action. To put it in more traditional terms you might well ask, "On whose side are you each day of your life - God or Satan? Good or evil?" Are we working for God's kingdom or some other?

Paul continues on this theme through vs 12. If you are using this as your text, it would be wise to include these as well.

Vss 13-17. But here is the heart of Paul really wants to say and concentrate on - their calling, continuing to hear it, affirm it, answer it, stick with it. I think Paul is reminding them of the essentials, that they hold on to the most vital things, not spend their time in needless and confusing speculations that sure only to distract and even terrorize them. That most vital thing

is that they are called to a mission, to be God's people in the world. Jesus might well say it this way, "The best way to be ready for the Boss or Master when he comes back is to be busy doing the things the Master left for you to do."

### **Luke 20:27-38**

In my sermon on this passage, "A God of the Living," I go into detail explaining this passage. So I am using below excerpts from that sermon to illuminate this wonderful teaching of our Lord in which I have found so much comfort and help. If you did not get the full sermon text and would like it, send me an email and I'll send it along.

Excerpts from "A God of the Living," a sermon by Bass Mitchell:

There is a story told about a mother and her young son. He was different from most boys his age; he had a terminal illness. All he could do now was sit and watch as other children went outside, laughed, ran, and played.

One day he and his mother were reading a story about Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table. As they read the story, the subject of death came up. The little boy stopped his mother from reading by asking, "Mom, what's it like to die?"

How would you have answered that question?

Death touches all of us at some time, some way, and we find ourselves asking questions:

What happens to people when they die?

Is there really life after death?

If so, what's it like?

Will we know each other?

What's it like to die?"

Jesus is asked such a question in today's text from Luke...

The question comes from a group of Jewish leaders called the "Sadducees." They were opponents of Jesus. They had already made up their minds about this topic-there was no afterlife! And they constantly debated the Pharisees, another Jewish group, who did believe in an afterlife.

Why didn't the Sadducees believe in an afterlife?

Because they only accepted the first five books of the Bible-the Books of Moses-as scripture, and they saw no teachings there about any afterlife. But what they did find was a law that said:

If a man dies without a son, his brother is to marry his wife and have a son with her. This son will be considered the heir of the dead brother, thus assuring that the dead man's lineage and name would continue. If you want to read this law, see Deuteronomy 25:5-10...

...Now the Sadducees said, "If there's life after death, why would God have given Moses such a law? It's not needed if a person lives on anyway. But, in fact, a person does not live on and that's the reason for this law. We live on through our children, they believed.

What the Sadducees debated the Pharisees about an afterlife, they often used a question to try to show how absurd such a belief was. It's the same question they ask Jesus.

"Suppose," they said, "that a man dies without a son. His brother marries his wife, as the law requires, but he dies too. The next brother marries her but he dies, and so on until seven brothers have married her. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? To whom will she belong?"

...the Pharisees believed that the next life would be very much like this one except on a much higher, grander scale. They believed that persons would be married and that life would be such that a man's wife could give birth everyday!...

This question confused the Pharisees. They didn't have a good answer for it, for... Jesus took this question seriously, even though he knew it was asked by persons who were trying to get him to say something for which they could condemn him.

Jesus begins his answer by saying that such a question shows a great lack of understanding of the resurrection. "In this life," he says, "persons marry and are given in marriage, but in the next life they neither marry nor are given in marriage. In fact, they cannot die for they will be like angels and they will be in the children of God."

Jesus is saying that we cannot compare this life to that one. There are no images adequate for it...

God created marriage as a gift for this life because it is not good to be alone. It was given to give us intimacy, companionship. It's also given as a means to create new life, to have children and take care of them. All of this is needed in this life. But in the one to follow there is no need for this kind of relationship, for we will not be alone anymore. We will all have a profound sense of companionship with one another as God's own children. There will be no need for procreation, for having babies then, for no one will ever die there...

...But Jesus doesn't stop there. He knows that more than anything the Sadducees admire Moses and his teachings. So, Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6 to them. "You are wrong," Jesus says, "in believing there are no teachings from Moses about the resurrection. Does not God say to Moses at the burning bush, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but the living; for to him all of the dead are alive."

God did not say to Moses, in the past tense, "I WAS the God of Abraham, I WAS the God of Abraham, I WAS the God of Isaac, I WAS the God of Jacob." No! God said, in the present tense, "I AM the God of Abraham, I AM the God of Isaac, I AM the God of Jacob." God had entered into a covenant with these men long before Moses. That covenant, that special relationship with God was still valid, still alive for they were still alive. God was telling Moses, "I am the God of a LIVING Abraham, a LIVING Isaac, a LIVING Jacob."

Because God is God, a loving, parent, nothing can take God's children away. When God enters into a relationship with us, nothing can send it-not even death. If God is God, how can he cease to be the God of those who have served and loved him and who have received God's blessings?

Isn't it interesting that God says, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob?" It is ABRAHAM who is alive with God; ISAAC and JACOB who live on in God's presence. Death did not take away their identity, their personhood, their individuality, uniqueness, all that which made them what they were...

## Discussion Questions

- A. Haggai 1:15b-2:9. As a kid, what did you enjoy building?
- B. Why does Haggai address everyone - from leaders to the common people?
- C. Do you think Haggai is talking about the importance of teamwork here?
- D. What's some project you or your church has started and you are beginning to feel discouraged about? What's the message here for you?
- E. How would you sum up his message to them?
- F. How do you deal with negative people? What insights might you gain here in coping with negativism?
- G. Ps 145. How does this psalm relate to the passage above?
- H. How would you sum up the message of this psalm?
- I. According to this Psalm, why does God deserve praise?
- J. How have you most felt God near to you recently?
- K. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17. What popular teaching has shaken you up in regard to the end of the world?
- L. Have you heard of or read any of the Left Behind books? What do you think about them? What do you think Paul would say in a book review of them?
- M. What advise does Paul give here that helps you most?
- N. When in your life were you the most rebellious?
- O. Where do you see rebellion against God today in the world? In your own nation? In yourself?
- P. What fears, concerns have you had in light of recent events? How might Paul's words here comfort or discomfort you?
- Q. Just how much about the end times do you think we can know and why?
- R. What's the real message Paul seeks to get across to them, especially in vss 13-17?
- S. Luke 20:27-38. Who has asked you recently a trick question? What was it and how did you answer?

T. What was the silliest question you have asked or been asked lately?

U. How do you deal with someone who wants to argue about the Bible or some pet doctrine?  
Might you gain some insights into this from Jesus here?

V. What's the one question about the afterlife that you would most like to ask Jesus? How  
might he answer it based on the answer here?

-Notes-