

from survival to worship

Have you ever felt like you were in “survival mode”? Have you?

You’d have to be superhuman to somehow answer “No” to that question.

We’ve all been in survival mode. You know, living seems to be a day - to - day proposition. Just getting to the end of the day ... surviving ... that’s a gi-normous enough challenge for us.

The prophet Haggai is called to speak to a people - God’s people - a people in survival mode.

We read some verses from Haggai, the second-shortest book in the whole Bible.

HAGGAI 1:15 - 2:9

Let’s put some context around this passage. Haggai is one of what we call the “minor” or “lesser” prophets - the ones who wrote the twelve short books at the end of the Old Testament, from Hosea through to Malachi. They follow the ... you’ve guessed it ... “major” prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jeremiah.

Haggai prophesies at a time when those in exile in Babylon are returning to the promised land of their ancestors. It’s to these returning ones that God sends Haggai to Judah to deliver God’s word to these weary refugees. Haggai is a refugee too!

When Haggai gets back to Jerusalem, something strikes him. The task of rebuilding the temple has been neglected. Little or no attention has been given to it.

So Haggai finds himself trying to motivate the people about another sort of rebuilding – that as they rebuild their lives, getting them back in order, they must rebuild lives that pay attention to God’s laws. More than this, they need to build into their lives once again their worship of the One God.

Alongside the rebuilding of their land, their homes, their livelihoods, their possessions, they must also take time to rebuild the temple - so they might once again get into the practice ... the lifestyle of worshipping God there.

Now; put yourself in these returning refugees' situation. All you've known has been destroyed, gone. The land hasn't been cultivated for 60 years. You're in survival mode.

And into this situation of confusing, bewildering, throw your hands up into the air resignation ... what does Haggai say to the people? He says something basically as simple as this: make God the priority in your lives and goodness will follow.

Now - we may not be in the same sort of survival mode these Hebrew people were experiencing. We know where our food, our shelter, our relationships, our possessions and livelihood are coming from ... but perhaps we *can* identify with them. As I said earlier, we all know what survival mode looks like.

That's right - survival mode. It's been said, "When you are in it, you don't have time to think about making the worship of God a priority in your life or taking time away from your already overcrowded schedule to help rebuild the temple. When you're in survival mode, you don't have enough time or energy to get the basic necessities done. So you certainly don't have extra time to give to the service of the church".

But that's precisely what God, through Haggai, calls the people to.

It's like God saying, "You don't have the time? Well, make the time. Taking time to worship God, to serve God, to serve others ... this is no optional extra."

Hear Haggai saying this,

"You want to know how you can get through when you're in survival mode? Well, it's not going to come by working harder ... or casting your eyes forward to that mythical quiet day in two weeks time. I'll tell you how to get beyond survival mode.

Build this into your life. Give some of your time to the most necessary thing. You see, it's more-than-necessary for your survival, more than building your houses, more than growing your crops.

"Find the courage, find the time in your busy life to stretch yourself, push yourself beyond your comfort zone ... make time to worship your God."

“Make time for me,” says the Lord.

And in return, says the Lord of Hosts (as one writer paraphrases it), “I will fill your house with a greater peace, greater splendour, greater prosperity than you’ve ever known”.

Wait a minute, perhaps you’re asking. Does that mean that if I give God number one priority in my life ... if I take time to serve God, the Lord will reward me by making me rich and famous ... that I’ll live long and prosper? Is that the sort of prosperity the prophet speaks of?

I find it interesting how we’ve somehow got the word “prosperity” in verse 9, in the NRSV pew Bibles: *And in this place I will give prosperity*. The Common English Bible has wording like that too: *I will provide prosperity in this place*.

That’s at odds with the wording in the NIV: *And in this place I will grant peace*. In The Message: *a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness*.

I’d like to suggest that we keep that word *prosperity* at arms length, as least if we understand prosperity narrowly in terms of financial riches and possessions.

You see, it’s times like this that it helps to go to the original Hebrew. You see, in Hebrew, the word translated by some scholars as *prosperity* is actually the Hebrew word for “peace” ... *shalom*.

I like to conclude my letters and emails with it, I’ve done so for most of my life. When I wish someone “shalom” - yes, I am wishing them ‘peace’; but not any sort of peace. I’m wishing them the peace that passes all human understanding found in the living God; the sort of peace that’s all about wholeness, harmony and well-being. That’s what I wish when I conclude an email or letter.

That’s what God, through Haggai is yearning for God’s people.

We can understand this to mean that when we serve others, when we give ourselves to the needs of others in our church family, to our neighbours in our community and wider in God's world ... perhaps especially when we don't have the time to spare ... then we will be rewarded in a way that's greater than what any earthly reward can offer.

You see, the rewards of the heart - the peace and satisfaction of knowing that our life has not been lived just for ourselves and our own household (as important as it is to care for them); that we've gave back ... that our life has been lived for others ... that's a greater reward than any sum of money can buy.

Now ... we are so inclined to say, aren't we ...

- I don't have time to be on that group
- I can't make that sort of financial commitment to the church
- My diary is too full for me to make time to be part of a lent small group
- "I don't have time to rebuild that temple while I'm trying to rebuild my own life".

If that's what we're saying ... if that's what we're thinking, we're in survival mode. Well ... let me tell you, God through Haggai is saying to people once in exile ... as God says to us, "*Make the time. Don't give me second billing*".

Worship me, says God, all the time, *especially* through the difficult times ... the challenging times ... the sorrowful times ... the survival mode times.

Friends, we of faith sit in this church this morning/evening - because we know something profound. We know God ... God who through Jesus Christ saves us ... frees us for life abundantly ... for life overflowing.

God doesn't provide us with a no frills, bare-bones existence. God provides ... and provides abundantly. The abundance of God ... the peace of God is available ... is given to all of God's people. Let us be open to God's rebuilding in our lives, and may our lives give worship, praise, honour and service to the living, life-giving God.