

Scriptures: Haggai 1:15B - 2:9; Luke 20:27-40

“Best of Times, Worst of Times”

Mr. Dickens wrote: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Even if you have never read a book by Charles Dickens, you probably know these opening lines from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Since its publication in 1859, it has sold over 200 million copies and is on every list for “must read books.” The 1935 movie version of the book starring Ronald Colman, Edna May Oliver, Reginald Owen and Basil Rathbone is one of the great well-loved classic movies.

Today’s Old Testament reading is written by Haggai, one who speaks forth God’s word in such a time as this too. The two short chapters we have in our Bibles only cover a four week period but in just thirty days, Haggai truly “rallies this rag-tag” group of citizens of Judah. Sixty=six years earlier, they had experienced the complete ruination of their way of life, which truly was the “worst of times.” What happened to them is almost unimaginable. The book of 2 Kings describes it this way: “. . . King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it; they built siegeworks against it all around. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine became so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land.”

“Then a breach was made in the city wall; the king with all the soldiers fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king’s garden, though the Chaldeans were all around the city. They went in the direction of the Arabah. But the army of the Chaldeans

pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his army was scattered, deserting him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, who passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah. They bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon.”

“ . . . Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city . . . all the rest of the population.” Indeed, it was the worst of times.

Eighteen years before Haggai’s mission began, after forty-seven years in exile, most of the exiles had returned home through the decree of the Persians, who had by now overthrown Babylon. Although most of them had never set eyes on Solomon’s temple, they knew all about it. It had been the center of the people’s lives. It was the center of worship of the LORD of hosts. It reminds me of our own beautiful house of worship. By the way, I came into the sanctuary one weekday and was especially impressed with the stories that our stained glass windows tell. This was something I had never thought much about. As I walked around the sanctuary, the sun was shining brightly through the Nativity Window and it was like I was at the manger with the shepherds from the fields. As I looked back at the window of Jesus’ teaching, I could almost hear him telling stories that we call parables. And then there was the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane and the overpowering ascension, shortly after the resurrection! The Good News was right here for me in beautiful colors.

We are blessed to have our spirits lifted regularly with our music, our choir, our organ, the word preached, the sharing of the bread and wine. To have that all taken away would be an awful tragedy. So, Solomon’s temple was gone. However, now there was great opportunity! And Haggai was there to remind them of the LORD of hosts who was there for them and to once again make his temple the center of their lives. “For I am with you, says the LORD of

hosts . . . the silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.”

And the people did come out of the doldrums and they did rally. And they worked and worked, even against many naysayers all around them. The book of Ezra describes what happened like this: “So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, son of Iddo. They finished their building . . . and this house was finished on the third day of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.” (Ezra 6:14-16, *NRSV*) You might say the people of Judah and been resurrected. It was the best of times!

With the Haggai story in the background, what the Sadducees do in today’s reading from Luke is so ludicrous. They don’t want to build something. They don’t want to see anything or anyone resurrected. They just want to tear Jesus down. They actually do conspire with the Romans to literally tear Jesus down later on when one of their own, Caiaphas the high priest, works to have Jesus crucified. But having no belief in the resurrection that will change everything, they now try to trap Jesus in a theological conundrum. In a nutshell, they make up a story about a woman who has had seven husbands die on her. So, the question they ask is: who will be her husband in the next life? Ha, ha, they think, how will this great teacher answer this? I think we have stumped him!

Well, Jesus knows all about Moses too. They should have known that! He tells them that the resurrected life is completely different than what they are trying to make it out to be. It is not some cosmic joke. As a matter of fact, Abraham and Jacob and Moses (their heroes) are living! Jesus says, “Now he is God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” What can they say? The Scripture goes on this way, “they no longer dared to ask him another question.” Maybe they should have thought twice about making up some crazy argument to get one over on Jesus. It almost reminds me of the Middle Ages questions of how

many angels can dance on the head of a pin or if a two headed person is baptized, should he be baptized twice, seeing that he has two heads. Crazy!

In the aforementioned, *The Tale of Two Cities*, we meet some extremely nasty villains, such as the Marquis St. Evrémonde and of course, the infamous Madame Defarge. But Sydney Carton is the character that would be the kind of person who would try and stump Jesus if in his day. He is a brilliant and argumentative lawyer and is also cynical and spiteful. He is extremely unhappy. He wastes his life away in the bottle. If anyone lives in the worst of times as the worst of people, it is Sydney. But God is the God of the living! And resurrection can be just around the corner for anyone, even Sydney. As the story unfolds, Sydney ends up going to the guillotine in place of the husband of the woman he has loved. And along the way, he remembers the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." They said of him, about the city that night, that it was the peaceablest man's face ever beheld there. Many added that he looked sublime and prophetic." And the last words of this resurrected man are these: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

The best of times! The worst of times! These two phrases may well define what life is like all around us. These two phrases might even define our own lives. So my encouragement today is to let Haggai challenge us to make the LORD of hosts central to our lives, trusting in God, knowing that God is there for us in all the ups and downs, the best times and the worst times. The power of the resurrected Jesus is there for our taking, for our reception, for our strength. Even if our name is not Sydney Carton.