

“The Advice of God”  
October 30, 2022

Haggai 1;1-11  
Luke 3: 10-11

Over on the west side of the Benton St. bridge, someone has transformed a chain link fence into a colorful sign. They wove strips of plastic through the fencing to create a design and a question that asks: “How do we proceed?”

I like the brilliant colors of the sign and I like the question even more. It confronts me several times a week as I drive to and from the church. As with a lot of good questions, it can be heard in different ways, eliciting different answers each time.

How do we proceed?

On foot?

By the river?

Quickly?

Cautiously?

Relying on luck?

Depending on God?

It is in an ancient question, similar to the one that the people asked John the Baptist: “What then shall we do?” Given the wrong we have done and the good we have failed to do, how do we proceed?

It is a modern question as well—one that Tolstoy famously asked when he moved from the countryside and encountered the poverty of Moscow: “What Must We Do?” Given the oppressive injustice around us, how do we proceed?

It’s a question that is put to us as citizens of a free democracy every two years: “How do we proceed? Which candidates will best lead us toward a more perfect union? Will ballot measures help ensure domestic tranquility or thwart it?”

I briefly reflected on this question with the Council when we met last Tuesday. My answer that time was: We proceed *together*.

We are proceeding, not just as individuals, but as a congregation into the future that is unknown and uncertain, as the future always is. We are proceeding *out of* a pandemic, it seems, even as we proceed *in* and *through* that same pandemic, with all of the irritations and aggravations and losses great and small that we have experienced.

How do we proceed? Together.

I told the Council that the leadership of this congregation is the best group of people I know of to guide us as we proceed. The members of our Council are all deeply concerned about the well-being of this church. No doubt many, if not all, of them have lost some sleep thinking about and

worrying about our present and our future as a congregation in the past 2 ½ years. We don't all agree on the details of *how* we should proceed, but the efforts of all are directed toward moving forward as a vital congregation—and moving forward *together*.

And I would add that it's not the Council alone. The dedication and commitment of the members of our congregation is what has, by God's grace and strength, brought us to this point on our journey. If I had to choose a group of people to go through a global pandemic with, it would be this church.

You might have seen the reports or heard from friends about pastors who have just given up and left their congregations during the pandemic. There is even talk about a coming "great resignation" on the part of clergy. But as difficult as these days have sometimes been—and they have at times been very difficult—each day I am grateful and give thanks to God that I am the pastor here, proceeding *together* with you.

And consider what we saw this morning: Four people, once strangers, now familiar faces, standing up here, owning our covenant, saying that they, too, want to walk *together* in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us. People keep finding us and keep deciding "This is the place for me." We need to keep our doors wide open and let even more people know about the ministry and mission of this congregation.

How do we proceed? Together.

And as we return to the Minor Prophets this morning, we hear another answer to this question. Haggai speaks the advice of God: Consider. "Consider how you have fared."

Another translation puts it this way: "Give careful thought to your ways."

We proceed with consideration, with careful thought.

Now, Haggai, of course, spoke in a situation far different from our own. The people had returned from exile in Babylon. Like us, however, they were trying to return to normal—and they weren't having much success.

The prophet lists the problems:

They planted crops—and they harvested little.

They ate—but they never seemed to have *enough*.

The drank—and they still thirsted.

They were clothed—but not warm.

And with that stunning image suggesting the ravages of inflation, they earned money—only to put it into a bag with holes.

God speaks to the people: "Consider how you have fared."

Not well. Not well at all.

The prophet was pretty sure about the reason for all of this. Other prophets said that the misfortune of the people was due to their ignoring the misfortune of others—they neglected the poor and the orphans and the widows, they passed by the hungry, they ignored the victims of

violence and oppression. Indeed, they created poverty and hunger and violence. But Haggai suggests that a little careful thought would show that ignoring the religious life of the community was as much a cause of the judgment of God as ignoring the suffering of people. While the temple was in ruins the people were trying to their own homes better and better.

Consider how you have fared. Literally the words are something like this: “Put to heart the path you have walked.” Think about how we have proceeded to this point and ask “How do we proceed from here?” One person suggest that we can understand Haggai best if we think of him as telling the people: “Stop your busy efforts to survive and ponder in your hearts what is really taking place. It is God who is still shaping our lives, not simply our own anxious efforts toward self-preservation.”

How do we proceed?

Again, our lives are far different than the lives of those ancient Jewish people. But the advice of God through the prophet speaks to us even now. We proceed by considering how we have fared, by giving careful thought to our ways, by pondering what has taken place, what is taking place in our midst.

Doing this, I think we will find first of all the grace of God that has sustained us and brought us this far, a grace that equips us as we walk together into the days ahead. It is grace—the unmerited love that God freely offers to us—it is grace, not our own goodness, that carries us, that strengthens us for our lives and our labor together. One translation of Martin Luther’s great Reformation hymn reminds us “Did we in our own strength confide, our struggle would be senseless.” All of our struggles, all of our protests, all our activities—caring for one another, working toward better relationships in our families and our community, fighting hunger and poverty and violence, seeking to establish justice and peace—all of our struggles make sense because of God’s grace. And this grace always brings change into our lives and our congregation—we can be thankful for that.

As we consider how we have fared, if we sense something like the judgment of God as well as the grace of God, if, as we give careful thought to our ways, we sense something like the call to repentance, to change, let us always realize that we won’t be saved by our goodness.

We won't be saved by all church programs, no matter how wonderful they are.

We won't be saved by what we believe.

We won't be saved by our occupations—in every sense of that word.

We will only be saved—made whole, restored to health—by the grace of God through faith.

How do we proceed? By stopping our busy efforts to survive and pondering in our hearts what is really taking place. God who is still shaping our lives, not simply our own anxious efforts toward self-preservation.

Considering how we have fared.

Together.

This is how we proceed.