

# COME, LORD JESUS! OH, WAIT ... HE'S ALREADY HERE

Sermon, November 7, 2010

**Texts: Haggai 1:13 – 2:9; Luke 20:27-38, II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17**

In attempting to follow the Lectionary readings, I've at times wondered what common "thread" weaving through the texts was perceived by those who plan the readings. At first, I just could not see any such connection in the Gospel text, but upon further reflection and study I think I've hit on it. All passages address a common theme of present and future hope ... of a promised Hope that is yet to come, and of how that very same Hope meets us in the immediate present.

In the Gospel text, Jesus affirms the hope of life beyond the grave in His encounter with the Sadducees, and by implication, spells out how that hope is a present reality. We know from the text that the Sadducees did not believe in life beyond the grave, because it is specifically mentioned nowhere in any of the five books of Moses, which is their sole scriptural authority (*as I've mentioned before, this is why they were named Sadducees ... they had no hope in life after death, so they were Sad, you see.*) Trying to entrap Jesus, they pose this rather absurd question. You know the story ... this woman marries, her husband dies; she marries his brother, he dies; she marries another brother, he dies and so on through all seven of the brothers ... instead of seven brides for seven brothers, we have one bride for seven brothers. My first thought is, "Men, stay away from that woman!" Seven times a widow! It makes you wonder if perhaps she was poisoning all these husbands. But that's beside the point ... what the Sadducees want to know, at least theoretically, is, "Whose wife will she be in heaven?" (*Then my second thought is will having seven husbands at once be heaven or the other place? Taking care of just one husband can be challenging enough!*) Jesus answers their original question in a way that I'll have to save for some other sermon, and then goes on to affirm the reality of eternal life by citing an authority the Sadducees will accept ... an account from Exodus, one of the five books of Moses. In fact, Jesus uses one of the most well known and important texts in all Judaism, the Lord's appearance to Moses in the burning bush, to make His point. In that encounter God said, "*I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*" Present tense. Not, "*I was the God of Abraham when he was alive,*" but "*I am the God of Abraham.*" God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. For this God Who meets us in the present, Abraham and the others are very much alive in His immediate presence,

In our reading from the Old Testament, the people had been back from Bablyon, now, about eighteen years. (*I provided a little background prior to the reading of the text: When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian armies in 586 BC, the holy temple in Jerusalem that had stood nearly four centuries was leveled, and they were carried off into captivity. For a couple of generations, they lived as captives in Babylon, then Babylon fell to Persia. King Darius of the Persians let the Hebrews return to their devastated homeland.*) King Darius authorized, and even helped provide financing for, the rebuilding of the Temple. Zerubbabel and Joshua began organizing the daunting work of rebuilding. As we pick it up in chapter 2; v. 3, God says: "Ask the people, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory?' how does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" He's referring, of course, to the destroyed Temple. Those few who did remember the original Temple built by Solomon had to be well into their seventies and eighties by now, and they had to know there was no way they could match the old Temple ... they didn't have the rich extravagances of Solomon, with his professional craftsmen, the imported woods and huge quantities of gold. Also, that was another time, another era, a time when the nation was strong, prosperous, and the vast majority of the people in that nation were faithful and fervent. Now, the nation is devastated; they are few, relatively poor and with limited resources. How discouraging it must have been for those who remembered the glory days. How daunting the rebuilding task appeared. Yes, to them, the Temple would never be the same again.

And apparently, God agrees. To slightly paraphrase the text, imagine God saying through Haggai, "Ahh, so you remember what this Temple was like before. You may long for how things used to be. You may be thinking it will never be the same again. And you're right! It won't ever be the same again. But it will be DIFFERENT. In fact, the glory of the new Temple will one day far, far surpass that of the old. Don't be discouraged! Stop spending time and energy remembering the good ol' days, stop with the lamenting and complaining and go to work!" Three times God says in verse 4 ... "*Be strong ... be strong ... be strong ...* and then He says, "*Go to work. For I am with you.*" There it is. There's the promise. There's the hope. "For I AM WITH YOU. I will never leave you." There's also the promise of a greater Temple to come, but the immediate promise ... that's what the people need to hear and believe. *That Temple imagery is a prophecy, by the way, of the New Temple to come in Jesus Christ, one made up of living stones, a Temple that will extend throughout the world, a "place" in which God's Spirit still dwells, with Christ as the cornerstone. The body of Christ ... the church ... is that Temple in which God's Spirit dwells and fills*

*the world, bringing the good news of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. You and I are living stones in the temple of God. But that's another sermon.*

Yes, the fulfillment of God's promises may seem to appear far on some distant horizon. And yes, there were many huge obstacles to overcome. But in the meantime, God, the living God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, this God says, "***I am with you. Go to work.***" Do not let the great disappointments and ruins of life distract you from the greater promise of God. Do not let nostalgic yearning for some glorious past discourage you and sap your energy for the present. Do not let mountains and valleys before you become an obstacle to remembering just Who it is living in you and through you and what you are called to do and be. Do not let the pains, the hardships, the losses in life ever cause you to forget that because of the bond of God's Spirit, Jesus Christ stands beside you and in you to bring you through and into His promise of life, full, abundant and eternal!

Essentially, this is also Paul's message to the struggling church in Thessalonica. The particular challenge for that young church was that some were teaching Jesus had already come and the Thessalonians had somehow missed out, they got "left behind." That meant for them all the hardships they were experiencing, the persecutions they were enduring, was simply the way it was and would ever after be. "Do not be shaken or alarmed," writes Paul. He goes on to say in so many words, "The day of the Lord has not yet come, and the rebellion and lawless one behind all of this is destined for destruction. Make no mistake about it, Jesus will return. That day will come. Yes, come, Lord Jesus! But don't forget ... Jesus is already here. He is at work in you to make you His faithful people. God, who has revealed Himself in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who loves us and has given us grace, will give us strength and comfort as we follow Jesus today and into the future. You will share in His Glory, now and forever!" Paul reminds the Thessalonians and he reminds us that Jesus is with us in this life, and that there is *more* to life than this life, so stand firm, for the best is yet to come! Now and forever.

You may have noticed our worship services do not begin with an invocation, but with a Call to Worship and a Prayer of Adoration (*or a psalm that serves both purposes*). There's a reason for that. The dictionary defines "invocation" thus: (a) the act or form of calling for the presence or the assistance of some superior being. (b) conjuring; calling up a spirit (c) A call or summons; especially, a judicial call, demand, or order; as, the invocation of papers or evidence into court. (d) to bring something in from without. The act of praying a prayer labeled as an invocation might convey the wrong impression, that God is somewhere far away and/or "out there" and we need to get His attention. No, He is with us! He is closer to us than the air we breathe. And He is very attentive to us; we're the ones who need to be called to attention, not God. Rather than an invocation: "God, we invite you here among us", a better prayer would be, "We know we do not have to request Your presence, because there is nowhere You are not. So we celebrate the fact You are already here with us now."

Now, some of you know I do have an invocation during wedding services: I usually begin by praying, "*Almighty God, we come before You with grateful hearts, asking that You will draw near to us this hour to be the chief witness of the vows about to be made, etc..*" I pray this *not* because I believe God isn't already present, that I somehow have to get God's attention. No, I pray this to let Him know He has *our* attention, that we DO welcome Him as the Guest of honor, as well as to remind the couple and the congregation that these promises are being made in the presence of God.

As the Psalmist puts it, and as Jonah certainly learned, there truly is nowhere we can go to flee God's presence ... so, why do we act like His attendance is somehow intermittent? Why do we assume it's dependent on us to somehow get His attention, to get Him to show up? Our tendency is to think of heaven as somewhere out there or up there, the place where God watches from a distance and hopefully we will one day join him. But for the biblical writers, heaven is close. In fact, "heaven" is also a term used in the Bible to describe the Earth's atmosphere. Yes, the blue sky looks far away and "up there;" in reality, though, the air of our atmosphere is all around us and very near ... if it were not so, we'd suffocate! So, when Jesus describes the invisible (but very real) realm God inhabits, by inference He lets us know it's not only "out there" or "up there", but it is also as near as the air we breathe and the atmosphere surrounding our bodies. We don't have to *invoke* God's presence. We only have to *attend* to it, to turn to it, to tune in to it. We don't have to capture God's attention ... in fact, the exercises of discipleship (worship, prayer, Bible study) are all ways of letting God capture *our* attention. We are the ones whose attention needs to be captured, we are the ones who have drifted away, we are the ones who need to be called to worship. We don't have to summon God from another country or another dimension or another galaxy. We don't have to wait until He comes again with glory. So, be strong, be strong, be strong ... and get to work. For God is with us.

Yes, come, Lord Jesus ... but don't forget: He's already here.