

“God of the Living”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 6, 2022 – Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

[Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Luke 20:27-38](#)

We measure and mark times in many different ways. As our planet rotates while going on its slightly tilted journey around the sun, we mark each rotation of the Earth as a day, which we then divide into 24 hours -- usually. Today is a special day, as we are gathered here this Sunday having “fallen back” into our normal routine of measuring time by standard hours, making this day not a standard 24-hour-long one, but a special one with 25 hours in it. This special 25-hour-long day, and the special 23-hour-long day that comes once a year when we “spring forward,” was made this unique way we keep track of time the law of the land by the waving of a magic, ink-filled wand in the hand of President Lyndon B. Johnson back in 1966, although we and other nations had dabbled with messing with the clocks for the sake of “saving time” before then as well, and there is a current discussion in the halls of Congress, which always seems to be the case, about making Daylight Saving Time the way we measure time throughout the year or doing away with our funky switcheroo of marking time in our days altogether. I have my own opinions on the matter, but I will keep them to myself on this morning that seems to have *just the right amount* of brightness to it!

We do mark certain days and times as special based on what we declare them to be; other times, days and times become marked for us by the events that happen in them. For instance, yesterday will always be remembered in Houston, Texas as the day their Astros baseball team won their second World Series (or their first World Series win not involving a cheating scandal). And today, as we all now find ourselves living in new-normal time of Covid, with everything before March of 2019 being marked as pre-Covid or pre-pandemic. Of course, there are many other monumental events, such as natural disasters or wars, that similarly mark time because of how they changed everything in a moment.

For those living in the time of Haggai, the author of our first scripture lesson from the Hebrew Bible, the event marking time was the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the armies of the Babylonian Empire, which happened a couple of generations before the prophet wrote his tiny, two-chapter-long book. Haggai

and his people, who were then living under the rule of the Persians, who had conquered the armies of the Babylonian Empire, were allowed, along with other peoples that had been removed earlier from their own lands by the Babylonians to return to their homelands, to resume worshiping in their own ways and to rebuild their places of worship, palaces, and cities that had been laid to waste. But the Children of Abraham who were living at that time had never known the glories of their former Temple, for it stood in another era and had never been seen by them. Those people had only known life as a conquered and displaced people, having lived for a couple generations by then as exiles in a foreign land, and they only heard stories from their parents and their parents' parents about a before-time, when they worshipped their God according to their traditions at their temple in Jerusalem. Haggai's message to his people was for them to see that they were living in a new time, that God was at work doing something new among them, and that God had created a new era, in which God would rebuild and make glorious what was then lying in ruins.

Today's gospel lesson tells us about a time, some 550 years after the days of Haggai, when Jesus was in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. There, in the rebuilt and still-being-renovated temple, Jesus was teaching, still speaking, as did all Palestinian Jews of his day, in the Aramaic language of the Persians, when he had an encounter with some of the Sadducees. These were a sect of Jewish religious leaders that focused on worshipping in the temple; followed only the teachings of the Torah or the five Books of Moses and not the Prophets, Psalms, and other writings that most Jews of the day considered to be sacred; and taught that there was no resurrection or afterlife of any kind. After concocting a ridiculous story based on their ancient family values of levirate marriage, an instruction found in the Torah for a man to marry his brother's wife if she becomes widowed without children, which, by the way, is a biblical practice that is conveniently forgotten or ignored, along with many others, by those who claim we should all live with "biblical family values." Anyway, Jesus doesn't get tripped up by the Sadducee's silly story about levirate marriage, but instead teaches about how the time we experience while on living on the earth, in which we experience human institutions, systems, and ways of being, is profoundly different than the time we experience in eternity, in which we experience perfect communion with God and enjoy perfect peace with all that God has created.

In our Christian tradition, we believe that we are already citizens of this heavenly realm even while we remain living in this earthly one. Even now, the eternal Spirit of God is with us and within us, enabling us to pull perfect life from the heavenly realm beyond time and bringing more of this life that God intends for us into the days of our earthly lives, thus making our days on earth more heavenly and closer to what the God of the living intends for us to enjoy.

Perhaps, on this 25-hour-long day, you are marking the time of your own life by some past event in which you have experienced loss, thinking that life was good until that day when the relationship fell apart, the loved one was lost, or the destructive habit grabbed hold of you. Know that the God of the living is with you, that God seeks to rebuild and renovate lives that have been harmed or even ruined. As a church, the God of the living is calling us to not to lament about the loss of how things were pre-Covid, or about how the pews are no longer as full as they once were, or that we as Congregationalists no longer hold the power and influence we once did, but to seek for more of God's heavenly love to grow among us now in our new ways of being together as a household of faith. Let us, as a community and as individuals, seek for more of God's heavenly ways of increasing life and love to become our ways today, tomorrow, and in all the days ahead of us, in this realm and in the realm beyond time. Amen.