

**“God is Constant”**  
**Haggai 1:15 b – 2:1-9**  
**11/11/07**  
**Brentwood First Presbyterian**  
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***Introduction***

Broken schemes and unfulfilled dreams sting the face like desert sand. Have you ever felt so oppressed by events in your life that you lost your focus on God? Do you long for the “good old days” when things were better? Have you given up on God and decided you have to take care of things yourself? Then today’s scripture is for you. When you hear the name of Zerubbabel and Joshua, substitute your own name. Let the God of Haggai speak to you today.

***Movement 1***

**Opening statement**

Sometimes we idealize and idolize an image of the past.

**Illustration**

What do we know about George Washington? For one thing, he was tall. 6’2”. For another, he is viewed by historians as one of our three greatest presidents along with Abe Lincoln and FDR. He once threw a silver dollar across the Potomac, had false teeth made out of wood, asked the seamstress Betsy Ross to make the first American flag, he won every battle he fought in the American Revolution, and as a child admitted to chopping down a cherry tree. We idealize and idolize our first president, but the last five so called “facts” are not true. They capture virtues we wish to project on our idol, that of superhuman strength (there were no silver dollars at the time he was supposed to do this, and no one can throw a coin across the Potomac at the place he is said to have done it, it

is too wide). We project upon George Washington poverty so more folks can identify with him, when we say all he could afford was wooden false teeth (but he married a wealthy widow, Martha Curtis, and he had ivory teeth, and was very much the aristocrat). We project upon George Washington that he was folksy, a man of the people (but that the Betsy Ross story was a fabrication of her descendents 100 years later). We project upon him military genius (but he only won 3 of the 9 battles he fought in the Revolutionary War). And we project truthfulness (but historians are clear the cherry tree story is another fabrication). That is not to say our first president possessed none of these features (except he was not poor). But it is to say sometimes we worship a legend, and have a hard time giving up those things that are not true.

### **Today's Scripture**

Solomon's temple was a sight to behold. Even though it was only about 100 feet long, 35 feet wide, and about 50 feet high, smaller than the sanctuary we are in now. Despite its relatively small size, it loomed huge in the memory of the children of Israel. Like the house in which we are now worshipping, it had windows on both sides. Unlike our house of worship, it had two bronze columns, and was paneled inside with carved cedar. The internal doors were made of olive wood. The outside doors were made of cypress carved with images of palm trees and flowers. Both the inside and outside doors were covered with gold foil. The table for the bread of presence was also covered with gold foil. Solomon's temple, built in 1000 BC, was destroyed by the invading Babylonians in 587 BC. The Babylonians, who made other nations shake and made the earth tremble. Absolutely no stone remains of Solomon's temple, then or now. The Babylonians destroyed it completely. God tells Haggai to ask the political and religious

leaders, and the people themselves, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?” And yet, remember Solomon’s temple was smaller than the sanctuary in which we are now sitting.

### **Closing statement**

Our culture worships legends. We idealize them. We even idolize them over God.

### **Transition**

But there is a problem with glorifying past images, past legends.

### ***Movement 2***

### **Opening statement**

Sometimes our false illusions, our false idols, are just as precarious as we are at the top of a set of steps. Sometimes we fall. And sometimes our legends, our idols, fall as well.

### **Illustration**

It was dark at my friend’s home Friday night, and when I discovered no one was at home, I spun around to go downstairs, but fell 13 feet, down 10 steps, and landed on my face on a concrete aggregate driveway. I could have broken my neck or cracked my skull, but I didn’t. In the dark, all of us could fall and mess up our faces, couldn’t we? My fall is pretty embarrassing. The abrasions look terrible, and there will probably be a few scars. Gone is any illusion about my lightness of foot and physical coordination. Yes, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

### **Today’s Scripture**

The despair following the destruction of Solomon's temple was complete. No stone was left. Then Persia conquers Babylon, and sets captive Israel free. And Persia tells Israel to rebuild its temple. But 18 years later, the children of Israel still have not finished. History records 520 BC as a year of devastating drought. The children of Israel need hope. So Haggai encourages the children of Israel to resume the rebuilding. But when they look at the foundation of the second temple, it seems it is not going to be like Solomon's. It will be a temple to God, but it is not Solomon's. The children of Israel were once proud of Solomon's temple. But they are not proud of the foundation of the second temple. They start murmuring. The "Good old days" seemed so much better. God tells Haggai to say, "In comparison with [Solomon's temple] is this not in your eyes as nothing!" "Not much, right?" Babylon destroyed Solomon's temple 67 years ago. And almost no one lived into their 70s in Haggai's time. So the children of Israel were comparing present reality with childhood memories at best, and with legend at worst. The temple symbolizes for the children of Israel the kingdom of God. For the children of Israel, not only had their expectations for rebuilding Solomon's temple fallen, their trust in God had also fallen. They wanted to be in control. They were not willing to trust God.

### **Closing statement**

Sometimes our present reality does not measure up to and appears fallen compared to the legends we idealize and idolize. So instead of trusting God we grip the past.

### **Transition**

God wants dedication to the task, not nostalgia for the past. So Haggai the prophet tells us today to open our eyes. In response, and in a rush of wind, God's Spirit blows through the church, knocking us off our feet.

### ***Movement 3***

#### **Opening statement**

In the face of apparent change, God is always present.

#### **Illustration**

To keep from falling and to get back up on a dark night, we need a flashlight. God's Word is the flashlight that keeps us from falling and allows us to get back on our feet. When our good fortune fails us, God's Word is a constant beacon of light.

The pastor at Longbeach, MS, First Presbyterian Church was depressed. His congregation had been devastated by Katrina, though the church had miraculously survived. But they were no longer having worship services in the church building. After all, the city was in ruins. Every building south of the train tracks had been washed out to sea. He told one of my pastor friends that God had sent Katrina to demolish his community, and he was having trouble coping with this. My pastor friend begged to differ. She told him hurricanes were caused by cold fronts meeting warm fronts, the same physics set up by our creator so rain clouds would drop their rain. But sometimes, instead of just rain, hurricanes occurred. God did not plan hurricanes to happen, or for them to hit dry land. God was not absent or on a vacation. God was right there in Longbeach, MS. Right there in the form of people helping people. Pastors helping pastors. That night, a Sunday night, Longbeach First Presbyterian Church had its first worship service in 4

months. And the light in its stained glass windows shined for miles around, a beacon of hope.

### **Today's Scripture**

The prophets before the exile of the children of Israel to Babylon predict doom and gloom. The prophets during the exile console the children of Israel. And the prophets after the exile are interested in restoration. Haggai is one of the post-exilic, restoration prophets. He appears at a critical moment. Haggai knows that whatever shape the new temple will take, it is going to be better than the heap of stones now in Jerusalem's center. God tells Haggai to say, "My Spirit remains among you, do not fear!" "I am living and breathing among you right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back." "This temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness." The God to whom all silver and gold belongs will attend to its splendor. A return of the former glory, and even better. Because when God presides, poor beginnings do not mean poor endings. God is at work in ways no one can quantify.

### **Closing statement**

A familiar past is more comfortable than change. So we become stuck in the past. When this happens, we close ourselves off to what God's Spirit is doing in the world. When we idolize the past, we are blinded. But from the bondage of sorrow, the captives dream dreams. The promise of future glory foreshadows the creativity of Easter morning. God may be making a new thing. But God's love, mercy, and forgiveness are constant. And God's Spirit gives us the courage to dream dreams.

### ***Conclusion***

The legend of George Washington, falling on one's face, and the restoration of Longbeach First Presbyterian Church.

### **Closing statement**

In the first chapter of Haggai, God speaks through Haggai to the children of Israel, and to us today: "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses while this temple lies in ruins?" Do not fear that you have to do it all by yourself. Take courage. In the face of changing circumstance, God's love remains constant. We respond to God's courage and love by awakening from slumber. With bold new decisions, we rise on our wings.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...