**Sunday, April 11th, 2021**

**Haggai 1:2-8, 12-15, & 2:9**

We humans, from the beginning of time,

          have had great difficulty getting our priorities straight.

Two teenagers, Martin and Jerry, were caught shoplifting at a local Walmart.

The police were called, and they were arrested.

After they were processed at the jail, the officer told the teenagers

          they could make one phone call.

About twenty minutes later a young man showed up at the jail

          and asked for the new prisoners by name.

"I assume you are their lawyer?" the officer asked.

“No," came the reply. "I'm just here to deliver the pizza they ordered.”

They could have called their parents for help,

          but Martin and Jerry thought having a pizza was more important.

Sheila was driving down the road and spotted a fantastic yard sale.

She couldn't help but stop and look for interesting bargains.

She was enthusiastically taking her time

          browsing through the variety of interesting items for sale.

Sheila encountered her friend Nancy and as they shopped, Sheila said:

“My husband is going to be very upset I stopped at this yard sale.”

Nancy answered: "I am sure he will understand when

          you tell him about all the bargains you found."

"Normally, yes," Sheila agreed.

"But he just broke his leg falling from a ladder, and he is waiting

          for me to take him to the hospital to have it set and a cast put on."

We know we should put first things first.

Unfortunately, it is so easy to focus on second, third, or fourth, things instead.

The same was true for the people in the time of Haggai, the prophet.

God's message through the prophet Haggai hit the Jews where it hurt

          – right in their priorities.

The Jews had come back from exile in Babylon nearly 20 years before.

But after one false start on rebuilding the temple,

         the returned exiles devoted their energy to building their own houses,

          and caring for their own herds and crops.

Their homes were in good condition, with paneled walls, and fancy furnishings.

The ruins of the temple stood as a nagging reminder that they had neglected God.

The Temple was not simply another building, or church edifice.

It was the holy place where sacrifices were made,

          and people encountered God.

It was where the people encouraged each other, and helped one another.

It symbolized the nation's close relationship with the Almighty.

A shabby Temple indicated a break in that relationship.

The people had built fine homes for themselves while leaving God's house in ruins.

For 16 years nothing had been done except building the foundation.

God urged Haggai to arouse the people to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem.

At first Haggai's message to the people met with common excuses:

          The time isn't right.

          This isn't the way it used to be.

          We don't see enough results.

          There is too much opposition.

Haggai criticized the people for building luxurious homes for themselves,

          while God's house lay in ruins.

But he continued to encourage the people to restore their relationship with God.

He did not rage like Jeremiah, or create eloquent poems like Isaiah.

He put it simply and logically.

They had worked hard, but what had it earned them?

Their crops were unsuccessful.

Their money disappeared as soon as they earned it.

Why? Haggai asked.

Because they had mistaken their priorities.

They needed to put God first.

Haggai was the prophet who got results.

His words, rang clear in a time of confusion.

And for once, God's people listened.

Haggai urged the people in Jerusalem that the work of God was neglected,

          overlooked, and considered a lower priority than their own concerns.

The people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God,

          and the words of Haggai the prophet.

In four years the temple was complete.

What made the temple so important?

After all, the proper sacrifices and rituals could be carried out on a makeshift altar. But God's importance in the lives of the people was at stake.

He could not be properly honored so long as the house he called home lay in ruins. The temple symbolized God's presence, and Israel's priorities.

The people needed to put first things first.

It was time for making the things of God top priority.

Through Haggai, God urged the people:

          "Be strong and work; for I am with you.

          My Spirit remains among you.

          and in this place I will give you peace."

At the beginning of a Bible study, the pastor took a large piece of paper.

With a magic marker, he made a black dot in the center of it.

Then he held the paper up before the group and asked: "What do you see?"

One person quickly replied, "I see a black circle."

“Right," the preacher replied. "What else do you see?”

Complete silence prevailed.

"Don't you see anything other than the dot?" he asked.

A chorus of noes came from the group.

"I am really surprised," the pastor commented.

"You have completely overlooked the most important thing of all:

                    the large sheet of paper.

          In life we are often distracted by small, dot-like disappointments,

                    or painful experiences, or stumbling blocks in our way.

                    We are prone to forget the innumerable blessings

                    we receive from the hand of the Lord.

          But like the sheet of paper, the good things are actually much larger,

                    and far more important

                    than the problems which monopolize our attention."

Rather than concentrating on the trials of life,

                   we should fix our attention upon God's blessings.

We lose sight of God presence and help, simply because

          we fail to put God's purpose, priorities, and plans, first.

As we travel down life's pathway, may this ever be our goal:

          Keep our eye upon the doughnut, and not upon the hole!

AMEN