

One of my favorite films in recent memory is Alexander Payne's 2011 film *The Descendants*, starring George Clooney (it was my pick for Best Picture that year). Payne's film is an adaptation of a novel by the same name by Hawaii-native Kauai Hart Hemmings. Clooney plays Matt King, a Hawaiian real-estate mogul who's a distant descendant of Hawaiian King Kamehameha. As the film opens, King learns that, after a boating accident, his wife is brain dead, that he must now become the primary caregiver for his two daughters, from whom he has become distant.

King is also about to broker a deal that will sell a huge plot of pristine Hawaiian beachfront to a resort company. The deal will make King and his cousins hundreds of millions of dollars, but will sacrifice one of the few areas of untouched beach left in the state.

I love the film because it asks a question we don't like to ask: How do we recover from tragedy? Matt King and his daughters must tell their friends and family that their wife and mother is dying. But King also stands at a crossroads of native Hawaiian pride and the cost of colonialism. As the broker of this land deal, he must choose to protect what is beautiful about Hawaii or give it over to resortification.

Matt can't move backward - he can't uncolonize Hawaii. He can't remove all the other resorts and restore those beautiful, pristine beaches and grasslands. He can't undo the boating accident and bring his wife back. He can't go back in time and be a better father to his children.

Matt can't do any of those things. So what can he do? How can he respond in the face of grief?

Matt's question is our question: how do we respond to tragedy? A pink slip in you box at the office. Taillights illuminating the boxes in the back of the car as it drives off. A police officer at the front door. Or larger tragedies, like the 2008 collapse or 9/11 or Vietnam or Pearl Harbor.

Big, life-altering tragedies. Events we would admit are apocalyptic. World-ending (not *the* world, but our world). We call the aftermath "grief". A small word for such a terrible place.

Grief - like a wasteland of our emotions - a cold, gray place, where the world seems washed out, devoid of color, of emotion, of life.

We might be excused for hiding in our grief, for putting up walls to keep people out, especially when you consider the terrible things people say when we're grieving.

"God has a plan" or "It was meant to be" or "You'll get over it."

No wonder we want to stay in our grief, safe behind our walls. Safe in those gray places where we're at least alone with our sadness. Where we can go about our daily activities with a distant smile and some platitudes as armor against the well-wishers. **[If you can illustrate this, it would be awesome]**

If you know that sort of grief, if you've survived the end of the world and now you can't see any way to go on, if you're just existing because you can't imagine living again, I want to tell you something very important:

There is life after the end of the world. There is hope after everything's gone. But you can't find it behind your walls. We only find healing by choosing to brave the world again, by choosing to step out in faith, to engage in the work God is calling us to.

What we find when we step outside our walls is that God is waiting for us, waiting to restore and heal us. But only if we'll leave the safe places we've built in our selves.

I know that's scary. You're where you are because it's safer in there. I know it hurts to come out. I know it's terrifying to even imagine something past your grief.

But sit with me a while. I want to explore the world of the prophet Haggai with you this morning. Haggai delivered a message from God to a people who survived an apocalypse. A people who were living in that gray waste, who'd built walls to keep themselves safe (literally). And what God tells them is that their walls were actually slowly killing them.

And that's not what God wanted for his people then. It's not what God wants for you now.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a Bible, turn with me to Haggai chapter 1. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in or out of the pew in front of you, you can find Haggai on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one as a gift from us.

As you're finding Haggai: Haggai is another of the so-called Minor Prophets we've been hearing from this summer. The Minor Prophets are messengers God sent to his people during times of extreme political and religious turmoil. The messages contained challenge, encouragement and comfort, and they were all meant to help God's people navigate these massive cultural tragedies.

The most painful of all was the Babylonian Exile. In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire crushed the nation of Judah. They destroyed the capitol city of Jerusalem and God's Temple, the center of Jewish culture, religion and politics. The Exile was truly an apocalyptic event for God's people.

A few years after Babylon conquered Israel, Babylon was conquered by Persia, under the rule of Cyrus the Great. And his son, Darius, allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem, to begin to rebuild.

Enter Haggai. Haggai is a prophet who received messages from God. And - this is fairly unique, Haggai dated his messages by when Darius was on the throne, which means we can date Haggai's messages exactly. And it just so happens that Haggai's first message, which we're going to investigate together today, was given on August 29 (2 days ago), exactly 2, 534 years ago. Which isn't pertinent to our message, but I think is pretty awesome.

Haggai is addressing God's people as they literally make their homes in the ruins of their former glory. They're building actual walls (and, as we'll see, metaphorical walls, too) in the remains of their civilization. They're trying to make a new life in the midst of their old world.

So what is God's message to them? Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

On August 29 of the second year of King Darius's reign, the Lord gave a message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua\* son of Jehozadak, the high priest. "This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.' "

Then the Lord sent this message through the prophet Haggai: “Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies says: Look at what’s happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!

“This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies says: Look at what’s happening to you! Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, while all of you are busy building your own fine houses. It’s because of you that the heavens withhold the dew and the earth produces no crops. I have called for a drought on your fields and hills—a drought to wither the grain and grapes and olive trees and all your other crops, a drought to starve you and your livestock and to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get.” -- Haggai 1:1-11

God's people have returned to their homes. They have begun to rebuild. But they're neglecting the Temple - that's what God means when he refers to "My House". The Temple stood in the center of Jerusalem, of Judah's life, culture. It was the heart of the Jewish people.

And it remained in ruins. And God points out that their continued refusal to rebuild is having devastating consequences on their lives. God observes they're missing... something. They eat but are not satisfied. They drink but are still thirsty. They cover up but can't get more. They spend and spend and spend and aren't fulfilled.

Anyone familiar with grief recognizes these symptoms. Life has become bland. Gray. We can tell from God's description of the people that though they've returned and begun to rebuild, they haven't recovered.

And God tells them what they need to recover is to rebuild the Temple. That in fact God is stripping away the other things they're trying to fill themselves with - their grains and grapes and olives. Their income.

That seems... harsh. Doesn't it?

Can't God just leave these people alone? Let them grieve? Is God really so selfish and petty that he'll punish his people for not rebuilding the Temple first?

No. God can't just leave them alone. Not because God is selfish or petty, but because God loves his people, and will not allow them to die slowly behind their walls.

The hard truth is that when we're in the gray place, when we're trying to live past the end of our worlds, staying safe behind our walls is the wrong choice. It's safe. It's comfortable. But it's wrong. We'll wither and die.

As God observed: nothing satisfies. Nothing fulfills. And in the wake of tragedy, we're tempted to think that's just the way it is. But God knows that death and evil aren't the final words. Destruction isn't how the story finishes. The end is never the end, even if it feels like the end of the world.

God had a plan for Judah, and God has a plan for us. A good plan, a plan for life, not just existing. A plan for flourishing.

But we will not find that locked behind our walls. Neither would Judah. They had to return to the heart of their world - their relationship with God, and begin to rebuild.

That's why their lives were so empty: they were ignoring the very source of their life. They were trying to build a house without a foundation. They were trying to live without their very heart.

So God insists they return to him - not because God's a needy, insecure deity, but because God knows their only hope for life, for the abundant, overflowing, fulfilling, excessive life they're missing is to found it in their relationship with God.

And that begins for Israel by rebuilding the Temple. By attending to God's house, not just to their own houses.

But what about for us? Is this a "give money to the Church" sermon? Are we about to start a building campaign so I'm up here to say, "Give me some money and you'll feel better!"?

Let me assure you: not at all.

In the New Testament, in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, the early Christians realized they didn't need a Temple to connect with God anymore. Or, more accurately, that they themselves *had become God's Temple*. The Church - not the building we're all sitting in, but the body of believers, the gathering of people who follow Jesus - that is now the heart of our relationship with God.

And even for Israel, that's what the Temple *really* represented. It was the core of their relationship with God. So when they heard Haggai encouraging them to quit building their homes and rebuild the Temple, they heard "Quit building walls to keep God out. Quit going about your business like zombies, bodies without hearts, a people without a soul, tasting nothing, enjoying nothing, existing but not living. Return to the source of your life.

In the wake of tragedy, our spirituality is often the first thing we abandon and the last thing we return to. Especially if we've had a strong relationship with God, the feelings of pain and betrayal are hard to ignore. We get angry, or feel shame and inadequacy. We ask, Why did God let this happen? Is God just cruel? Or am I simply not worthy of God's love and protection?

And Haggai says, I get all that. But you find the answers not in ignoring God, but in leaning into your Spirituality. Leaning into the body of the Church. Don't shy away from your relationships here. Share your struggles with them. Don't hide. Don't put up walls. Yes it's easier. Yes it feels safer. But that way is only isolation. Blandness. Death.

But wait, you say, how can I trust God? How can I lean into my spirituality, to the body of the Church? God could've stopped what happened to me. God could've prevented that death, that suffering, that abuse, that tragedy. The problem is that I don't trust God.

That's why we build walls in the first place, isn't it? Because we see God sitting up in heaven, looking down on our suffering, distant and dispassionate. God could do something, but chooses not to? Isn't able to? We're not sure, but the reality is - so we think - God sits this one out while we suffer down here.

Except that's not the whole truth. God became human in the person of Jesus. God came to live among God's people, at a time when they were under the boot of another evil empire - Rome this time, instead of Babylon. Jesus came to demonstrate God's way to us, to show us what it looked like to live in God's kingdom rather than Rome's (or Babylon's). Jesus came to show us what true life, excessive, overflowing life looked like, to invite us out of the gray place into the real world of his love.

Jesus' teaching, his example, his invitation, got him killed. Rome arrested and tortured him, and eventually killed him. And while Jesus was hanging on the cross, he cried out, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

That's the cry of all of us in the gray place, hiding behind our walls, shaking our fists at the heavens. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why did you leave me to suffer alone? Why didn't you do anything?

On the cross, we see God's answer: that we have not, in fact, been left alone. That God has all along been suffering with us, has borne the full weight of our darkness with us and for us. That in the person of Jesus, God has come even to the God-forsaken so that in the wake of Jesus' death, no one can say that God has abandoned them.

In the person of Jesus, God reenacts the destruction of the Temple, the collapse of the created world under the weight of human sin, of empire-building. And three days later, God restores the Temple of Jesus' body, by raising him from the dead. In the Resurrection, God starts from the center out, rebuilding and restoring the world. Healing the broken, embracing the forsaken, silencing evil once and for all. Death, the great enemy has been defeated, and now God is cleaning up the rest, taking back creation one day at a time.

Jesus' resurrection gives us the confidence to leave our walls, to step out of the gray place into the light. We can follow in the footsteps of our Israelite ancestors, who responded to Haggai's prophecy and began to rebuild:

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of God's people began to obey the message from the Lord their God. When they heard the words of the prophet Haggai, whom the Lord their God had sent, the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave the people this message from the Lord: "I am with you, says the Lord!"

So the Lord sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the enthusiasm of Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the enthusiasm of the whole remnant of God's people. They began to work on the house of their God, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, on September 21 of the second year of King Darius's reign. -- Haggai 1:12-15

At the end of *The Descendants*, Matt King and his daughters are watching *March of the Penguins*. The final shot hovers over them, together as a family, in the wake of devastation. Morgan Freeman's voice, meanwhile, narrates the history of Antarctica, describing how it once had a climate more like Hawaii,

teeming with life. Though today, much like Matt and his family, it is a cold dead place, still life has found a way to thrive, in the form of the penguins.

This is the hope for all of us: that no matter how dead our lives seem, no matter how cold and gray, life wins. God will not let death have the final word.

So let us refuse to stay behind our walls, safe but ultimately dying. Let us step forward, out of the gray place, into the light, confident that the God we meet there is not distant, uncaring and ineffectual. Let us trust that the God who meets us is the God who became one of us, who suffered and died for us, and who was raised from the dead as an eternal guarantee that God will give us life no matter the cost.

### **Communion SetUp**

[Communion Slide] This is why we celebrate the communion meal today. This meal remembers the night before Jesus was killed, when he shared a final meal with his followers. During that meal, he broke bread and gave it to them to share. He told them the bread was his body, broken for their sinfulness. So too we receive wafers that remind us Jesus died for *our* sinfulness to. He was broken for our brokenness.

Later in the meal, Jesus gave his followers a cup of wine. Like the bread, he told them the wine was his blood, poured out as an offering to God, the foundation of a new relationship between God and humanity. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to remember that Jesus' death made it possible for us to leave the gray place and be reunited with God.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive this meal. This is Jesus' table, and he offers his body and blood to anyone who want them. So if you're willing to leave your walls behind, to lean into Jesus' church, to the body of followers you see around you, then you're welcome to come to Jesus' table.

Before we come today, I want to lead you in a prayer of examine. It's a chance for you to reflect prayerfully on Haggai's message today, to consider how you will respond as you leave this place. I'm going to put three questions on the screens, give you a chance to reflect on them and then offer a prayer for our communion meal. As you're ready to come forward, you're invited at that time to do so.

### **Examine**

How has trauma paralyzed you?

What is God calling you to that you're afraid to do?

How can you choose this week to say Yes to God?