I. The importance of an encouraging word

His name is Henry and he’s native Alaskan – Eskimo was the term in the past. He’s about eighty years old now, but he still has a perpetual smile on his face and when he laughs it comes from way down in his belly. At church it’s best to sit behind Henry because he sings too loud for the quality of his voice. Henry was the Pastor to Students at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary for many years, including the time that I was there as a seminarian.

He was always surprised and somewhat amused that he ended up as a pastor. That’s not what he intended to do with his life. As a native Alaskan, he grew up steeped in that culture and when he was a young man Henry went to work on a commercial fishing boat. He spent years as a commercial fisherman, working the wild and frigid waters off the coast of Alaska. Then God got a hold of him and called him into ministry. Henry responded and became a Presbyterian pastor. He served churches in places you might not expect a native Alaskan to serve – Nebraska, Minnesota, and Washington state. By the time I knew Henry, he was getting close retirement from his position as Pastor to Students at UDTS. But he was perfect for that job – one of those guys who just cared about people, including me. It didn’t take Henry long to figure out that I am an introvert. Being more reserved, I wasn’t the kind of student who was going to beat a path to his office to share whatever might be troubling me.

So Henry looked for other opportunities to connect. I was in his practical ministry class where he taught us pastors-to-be about visiting in hospitals and working with funeral homes and giving the benediction and officiating at communion. Henry noticed that I tended to be a serious guy and a serious student, so whenever he would see me with a too serious look on my face he would say: “Don’t smile – I don’t ever want to see you smile!” Then he would break into a big smile and a belly laugh, and I couldn’t help but smile and laugh with him. Even now, when I get too serious I think of Henry warning me not to smile and I can’t help but smile.

The thing I remember most about Henry was that, for me and for many other seminary students, he was such an encourager. We all made lots of mistakes as we tried to learn how to be pastors. He was careful to correct our mistakes, but Henry also had a way of noticing what you did well and pointing it out – just at the time when you were feeling beat up or overwhelmed or defeated. He was so good at speaking an encouraging word at just the right time.

As we turn our attention this morning to Ezra 5, we encounter a situation in which the leaders and people who returned from exile in Babylon to Judah needed to hear an encouraging word. If you were here last week when we looked at chapter 4, you may remember that after the returned exiles began the rebuilding work on the temple in Jerusalem by laying its foundation, they encountered opposition from the people who lived around them. As a reminder, here’s what it says in Ezra 4:4-5: “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia until the reign of King Darius of Persia.”

Now, just to be sure we have the story straight in our minds; remember that these returned exiles are the brave Jews who decided to go back to Jerusalem and Judah when King Cyrus invited them to do so. Ezra tells us that God stirred up Cyrus’s spirit to direct the returning Jews
to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. It was the Lord’s plan for the temple to be rebuilt. It was the people’s call to carry out that plan. And yet, they ran into obstacle after obstacle: the long and difficult journey from Babylon, the nearly complete destruction they encountered with the temple and in Jerusalem when they actually made it back, and then in Ezra 4 they were faced with opposition from neighboring peoples.

So, is it any wonder that the returned exiles got discouraged in the project to rebuild the temple? Even though it was God’s call for them to do it, the situation proved to be more discouraging than they could handle. Here’s how Ezra ends chapter 4 with verse 24: “At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped and was discontinued until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.” If you do the math on the work stoppage of the temple project, you will find that there was a 10-15 year period of time in which there was no progress. That is a sign of major discouragement, perhaps even hopelessness on the part of those whom the Lord had called to do the work.

II. Haggai’s the guy (with Zechariah)

What they needed was a guy like Henry – someone who would point out what they did really well and encourage them to get back to following God’s call to rebuild the temple. And that’s what happens in the Ezra 5 text we read this morning. We didn’t actually get to hear the encouraging words in our passage, but we did get to meet the encouragers. They were two prophets: Haggai and Zechariah. Now keep in mind that, biblically speaking, a prophet is not necessarily someone who foretells the future. No, a prophet is someone who speaks a word that God has given him or her to the people the Lord wants to hear it.

So let’s take a look at Haggai’s message from the book bearing his name. It’s toward the very end of the Old Testament – Malachi is last, then Zechariah before him, then Haggai before him. Here’s what he says in the first chapter of his book:

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest: Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house. Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them in a bag with holes.

Those words from Haggai are straightforward and pretty hard-hitting. It’s not immediately obvious how they would have been received as words of encouragement by Zerubbabel and Joshua. But look at the response recorded just a couple of verses later in Haggai 1:

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people the Lord’s message, saying, I am with you, says the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people;
and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

So what was it about these words from the prophet Haggai that encouraged the people who had been immobilized by their discouragement for over a decade? Let’s take a look to see what we can learn and, perhaps, put into practice ourselves.

III. Give it a try

First, Haggai was honest. He didn’t try to sugar-coat his description of the situation. He spoke the truth as he saw it and as God revealed it to him. Haggai pointed out that the returned exiles had their priorities mixed up. They were living in homes that were relatively comfortable by that point in time – almost 20 years after their return to Judah from exile in Babylon. Yet, the temple in Jerusalem, God’s house that they were called to rebuild when they came back, was still just a foundation that had been in the ground for more than ten years.

Did the people wonder why the Lord wasn’t pouring out his blessing and provision upon them? Were they confused as to why their harvests were less than they hoped for? Why did it always seem like they were living hand-to-mouth? Haggai spoke God’s truth in response: it was because they weren’t fulfilling the call that the Lord entrusted to them when they came back. It was the Lord’s priority for the temple to be rebuilt – that’s what Haggai reminded them. He was honest. He was straightforward. He spoke the truth and the people knew it – they might not have enjoyed hearing it, but they knew it was God’s perspective.

Second, Haggai recognized the leadership role that the Lord had for Zerubbabel and Joshua in the rebuilding project. Having their leadership recognized must have been very encouraging for the governor of the struggling province of Judah and the high priest for a temple that consisted of a few holes in the ground. I imagine that both Zerubbabel and Joshua were feeling like failures as far as their leadership went. After all, the project had been idle for so long. The people were frightened into immobility. They had hunkered down for a long time. Surely real leaders would’ve been able to get things going again before a decade passed – right?

But God didn’t reject the two leaders of the returned exiles. The Lord didn’t tell Haggai to anoint different leadership. Instead, the prophet spoke the reminder of God’s call directly to Zerubbabel and Joshua. It was a vote of confidence, a word of encouragement, to say: “This is your project to lead. You can do this.”

Thirdly, the prophets joined in the work. Haggai and Zechariah didn’t just speak the words of the Lord and then sit on the sideline to watch the others do the real labor. No – they rolled up their sleeves and got to work with the rest of the people under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua. Listen again to this morning’s text in Ezra 5:2: “Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set out to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.”

So, what’s the lesson for us as followers of Jesus? What are we supposed to learn and put in practice this week as Christians in the 21st century? Well, can you think of anyone in your sphere of relationships who’s going through a tough time? You know the saying: “When the going gets tough…” No, not that saying – the better saying: “When the going gets tough, a word of encouragement is more important than ever.” Perhaps the Lord is calling us to be on the lookout for opportunities to be encouragers for folks who are going through challenging times.

And if you have the privilege, even in the coming week, of speaking an encouraging word to someone who is discouraged, remember what we learned from Haggai: be honest about the
situation. Don’t use a lot of flowery language. In Christian love, tell it like is. Then, highlight what God shows you is good and positive and capable in the person you are seeking to encourage – just like Haggai did for Zerubbabel. And finally, keep in mind that encouragement isn’t just about saying something nice – role up your sleeves and get involved. As much as you are able, be a part of the solution.

Remember the Apostle Paul’s words to the Philippians: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” God knows we need more encouragers like that. Will you be one of them?