

Building on the Promise

Haggai 2: 1-9

Luke 20: 1-8

Our world has always depended on visionaries who could see beyond the obvious and expected. They didn't look at an apple seed, think it is inedible, and throw it away. The visionary instead saw in the same apple seed something that came from the core, something that could be the beginning of a new tree. The family scoffed and picked more apples, never asking how they grew on the tree. The neighbors mocked the visionary for the absurd notion that a tiny brown bit could create a whole tree. The community called such thinking useless, dreamy, and unproductive.

We may hear such a scenario and find it regrettable that people could be so close-minded, unimaginative, and uninspired. Yet this is what visionaries run into all the time. Sometimes it's for very good reasons; the visions can be outlandish and bizarre. But we depend on visionaries nonetheless because they're the ones who see beyond the obvious and expected.

Consider Gaston Glock, the inventor and manufacturer of the Glock handgun. The Austrian engineer had, until well into middle age in the 1980s, dedicated his career to manufacturing curtain rods and knives. Glock knew almost nothing about firearms. But when the Austrian military issued a call for a sleek, new-generation sidearm, the inventor was intrigued. Not knowing what "couldn't" be done, Glock took three months to develop a working prototype of his lightweight plastic pistol, which went on to revolutionize handguns.

Or consider Marshall Medoff who was profiled by *60 Minutes* about a year ago. A businessman who retired a bit early, he was intrigued 25 years ago about finding an alternative to fossil-based fuel. Quite eccentric, or a bit nutty, Medoff knew nothing about science, but quickly learned from his studies that one of the most common products in the world is cellulose or sugar naturally produced in abundance by plants. By separating the cellulose from the plants, the extract could be the basis for many things, including fuel and biodegrading plastic substitutes. The trick was doing the separation in a cost-effective manner. Medoff was able to perfect a method by reversing a technology in use in other fields. His invention and decades of study have landed the 81 year old some deep-pocket backers to help scale up his operation called Xyleco that recycles dead plant material – biomass – into energy and some other products, like a sugar substance that has no calories and would have no impact on diabetics. There are about 5,000 patent applications pending. Besides the first 42,000 sf facility north of Boston, there is also a 600,000 sf facility in Washington state.

Xyleco's Board of Directors features people like Steven Chu, former Secretary of Energy and Stanford professor, Robert Armstrong, professor of Chemical Engineering at MIT, Sir John Jennings, former Group-Managing Director of Royal Dutch/Shell, William Perry, Former Secretary of Defense and engineering professor at Stanford, Nobel Prize in Chemistry winner Richard Schrock of MIT, and former Secretary of State George Schultz. Ten years ago, anyone would have been skeptical that a non-scientist

visionary like Medoff could create a breakthrough scientific technology. Now they're lining up to sing his praises and cash-in on the promise that his work has revealed.

Prophets are another example of visionaries, having an understanding for what God sees and what God wills for God's people. And their counsel is often the subject of derision, too.

The prophet Haggai is addressing God's people who had returned from Babylonian exile. They've been "home" for about 20 years. The Temple remains in ruins as do the city walls.

The people of this now-Persian vassal state have endured much in coping with their new conditions. A few are doing very well, but most people are suffering. The destruction of the once-proud city continues to confront them daily, over 70 years after the fact. It's depressing, and these have been dark times. There is no genuine expectation that things will get any better.

Where is the promise of God on this dim and dismal horizon? Beaten down by their conditions and their prospects, the people feel hopeless and despairing. The political and religious leaders have shown no ability to inspire and lead. Who has the vision that might galvanize the people to action? Who can see God's promise ahead and move everyone forward toward it?

This is the job of the visionary, the prophet, the one who can see through the haze of distractions and beyond the defeat of circumstances and transcend oppressive burdens. The prophet confronts all of these issues with the power of faith in God, with complete trust in the promise of God that awaits God's people responding with faith and devout determination.

The prophet begins by having them recall (if they can) the Temple in its proud days before the Babylonian destruction. He acknowledges that now the great and glorious Temple of God is *as nothing*.

Haggai proceeds to announce God's word for his people: "*Be strong [all you leaders]. Be strong, all you people of the land,*" says the Lord, "*and work. For I am with you,*" says the Lord. Of course, exhorting them to courage (NRSV) and strength to engage the great tasks before them won't be enough.

But there is also assurance that the people of God are not alone as the prophet continues revealing God's word saying: "*Work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.*" God promises to be with them in their time of trial and struggle, recalling God's promise and abiding presence amid the far more difficult trial and struggle of the exodus from Egypt. God has a track record, and God has a promise for God's people. God's promise awaits fulfillment in them once again.

But we can imagine God's people looking despondently at the tremendous work before them, wondering where the resources will come from when the people are already straining under very adverse conditions. God may be with them, but is God going to pay for this? Hmm. Funny you should ask.

The prophet continues with God's revelation: *In a little while, I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord.* While many of the items of value carted off from the Temple by the Babylonians have been returned to Jerusalem along with the exiles, these beautiful items won't pay for the work. God adds a material promise to the spiritual promise. Like shaking fruit out a tree, God will shake the splendor of wealth from the nations of the world.

How is God going to manage this one? The answer is pretty clear: *The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord.* Well, I guess that takes care of that. God is determined to have the Temple not only restored, but that it should *be greater than the glory of the former Temple.*

Finally, God says: *And in this place, I will grant peace.* Here, peace is not simply the absence of war or conflict. With the Persians securely in charge, there was no local competition. Rather, Haggai's *peace* here is *shalom*, the big Hebrew word for peace, wholeness, and blessing. The inference clearly is that bringing the House of God, the Temple, to a new glory will not only complete a wonderful building project. It will also bring justice, healing, and wholeness to a people that has not seen such blessing in many, many years. God will be honored by the people, and it will bring amazing blessing to God's people, too.

The prophet calls their attention to God's promise that awaits. God's promise is beyond their imagining. This huge project is not about recreating the past. It's about setting the direction for the future, and God's promise is for a glorious future for his people indeed. With those kinds of words, Haggai reveals God's promise for his people that lies ahead, waiting for their faithful response.

We know what the response was to Haggai's prophecy from other sources; the Temple was eventually rebuilt. We get a more direct response to vision and prophecy in the reading from Luke.

Jesus has now completed the journey that we have followed the last few weeks and has arrived in Jerusalem. In our selection, Jesus is teaching in the Temple and drawing considerable attention to himself. It says that he is "preaching the good news." That's shorthand for Jesus talking about the coming Kingdom of God when God takes power away from the wealthy elites and worldly powers and brings new life to God's people, a life of equity and justice, of grace and peace. And this new life is available to you right now as you follow the way which Jesus is teaching.

Now there isn't anything grossly off-base for Jesus to teach such things in the Temple, but it is raising plenty of eyebrows because it treads close to rebellion against the current power players. Prophets and visionaries tend to step on toes. A cluster of the Temple's leading priests, scribes, and elders decide to challenge Jesus.

They ask: *"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things. Who gave you this authority?"* Jesus clearly isn't reading from their script; just who does he think he is?

In Jesus' typically annoying manner, he answers the question with a question: *"I will also ask you a question. Tell me: John's baptism —was it from heaven, or of human origin?"* He refers obviously to his mentor, John the Baptist, who provided a baptism. This is noteworthy, not only because he was likely Jesus' mentor, but he was also the one who announced the coming Kingdom, inaugurating the new age of God's reign, and he was killed – beheaded as the story goes – by puppet King Herod. John the Baptist was regarded as a visionary and prophetic troublemaker, too, fomenting inspirations that were decidedly not part of the power players' script.

Jesus' question sets them on their heels. John was quite popular among the people – the reason for his arrest – but considered a threat by the Temple's powers-that-be. They're caught. Denounce John and they would not only open a fresh wound among the people, but they would also be tipping their hand to Jesus and the people that he was a target to be silenced. They voiced their best option: *"We don't know."*

Jesus responded in tit-for-tat manner: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."* End of discussion.

It is interesting that as Jesus is coming to the end of his ministry, he can still hearken back to his mentor John the Baptist. Jesus never lost sight of the fact that he was building on the promise first laid out by John a few years before. Although dead and gone, as was often the way of prophets who ran up against the powerful in Jerusalem, Jesus' Kingdom message received its first form from the voice, mind, and spirit of John the Baptist. Jesus likely gave it new dimension and certainly gave it new direction as he saw himself in the role of the Son of Man to advance the Kingdom way of life.

The promise of God is often sitting right in front of us, just waiting for us to go out and meet it. The blessing within the promise remains out of our reach until we reach beyond the obvious and expected. The visionary can reveal that for us. Or we might be able to embrace the vision of the Kingdom that Jesus has been trying to teach us. New life awaits us within that promise, and that new life is meant to be shared for the blessing of many others.