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Disruptions

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Scripture: Haggai 1:5-6, 2:6-7

Well, if you know me well, you know that in most cases I am an optimist. I see the glass as half-full, maybe even three-quarters full, on most good days. I do try to make lemonade out of lemons, and I've been accused more times than I can count of wearing rose colored glasses, but these days there's a lot going on in the world that can bring a girl down. As a pastor, I'm faced with conversation after conversation of how the Church in America is in decline. As an American I wonder how we are going to bridge this divide we are experiencing in our culture these days. As a mother, I can be consumed with the question about how my kids are performing or not performing academically, socially and athletically. Fill the world then with technology and easy access to alcohol and drugs, and it can be totally overwhelming to parents these days, not to even mention the news that we keep receiving of three hate crimes in the last ten days, another shooting yesterday morning in the midst of an exercise class. Homelessness and encampments around the country where homeless are staying. Famine around the world, and on and on we could go.

All these things can leave this optimistic soul feeling less than half full, and it can feel that things are getting worse and worse, can't it? As people of faith, in particular, I wonder how we are supposed to respond to the news of hatred and evil, to the darkness we are feeling personally and worldwide, and how, at the same time, we proclaim that God is still here. So, when I wrestle with these big questions, I find that going back helps me. It helps me realize that we are not the first to wrestle with such things, to navigate such challenges. This is, in fact, the human condition throughout all of history, and, when we can return to the saints, those that we have known and lost and those that have gone long before us, we can see that there is hope and that the world has been broken before, and God has spoken and used people along the way.

So, our scripture passage this morning is this little, obscure passage from Haggai, and I think it's a passage that reminds us what it looks like to be disrupted. I think what we most often do when we face this disruption is that we double down our focus on ourselves. We get overwhelmed by what's happening out there, and we tend to go inside if we have the luxury to do so. We focus on our own homes, our own endeavors and taking care of our own agenda, things that we think we can control, but Haggai was sent to the people of God to remind them that as the people of God they had a different call, not a call to be self-focused and self-preserving but a call to serve God. Haggai says to them, "Give careful thought to your ways. You've planted much, but you have harvested little. You eat, but you're never truly full. You drink, but you just keep drinking more. You put clothes, but you're not warm. You earn wages just to put them in bags filled with holes."

The people in Haggai's time were doubling down on focusing on themselves after all the disruptions they had faced. They had lost sight of a larger call that God had given them – to follow him and to restore the temple so that he could be worshipped in the temple, and we see that doubling down on themselves and their own endeavors wasn't even working. They had what they should have needed, but they were not satisfied, and they were wondering where God was in the midst of what they

perceived to be disruption and struggle. I think as humans we're tempted to look at the challenges before us to the disruptions that enter our lives and to see them as messing up our plans, messing up our hard work, messing up the agendas we've so carefully crafted. We point the finger at what we think are uncontrollable circumstances outside of ourselves, but we forget that we have more to live for. In the case of Haggai bad weather and fertile land and difficult circumstances had something to do with the challenges that the people of God were facing, but what had to do with the challenges as well was the fact that they had lost sight of God. They had forgotten their true and real call to follow God, and Haggai was not calling them to rebuild God's temple to gain God's approval so that things would change but instead just to be faithful to God, to honor God for God's love for them, and when the people in the Book of Haggai hear this prophetic word, amazingly they do it. A lot of times the people of God turn their backs and keep going the wrong way, but in Haggai the people do it. They do let go of their own agendas, and they begin to rebuild the temple. Disruption can seem like this thing that messes everything up, but I think disruption is simply part of what it means to be alive. The people of God in the Book of Haggai were distracted by their own plans not working out the way they wanted, and, then, they were disrupted by the plans God had for them that they actually chose to follow. That's the end of the Old Testament.

Then, when we get to the New Testament, as the Gospels begin to unfold, we see disruption come in all these new ways – oppressive Roman rule, corrupt authorities, oppressive people groups, and even from the Pharisees, the people of God who were imposing rules and laws in the name of God that did little to promote relationship with God or care for others. And, then, amazingly, in those Gospels, Jesus comes as the Prince of Peace, but Jesus' way of bringing peace is to disrupt these ideas and practices the people were living in. Jesus arrives, and he serves radically. He loves without any boundaries. He calls out oppression. He shows God's people a completely new way of reorienting their lives toward God, and Jesus doesn't bring peace by singing "kumbaya" or by giving hugs. Jesus brings peace by disrupting the powers of the day, by taking the side of those who are oppressed. Jesus then uncovers systematic injustices that were being committed against women and widows and children and anyone who could have been labeled "the other." Jesus also disrupts the comfortable lives of those with wealth and power. He invites them to look outside of their own interests to the interests of serving God. Does that sound familiar? Jesus says disrupt your own privilege to follow the living God, and Jesus believes this so deeply that he will actually go to his death for this disruption, and then he disrupts death, showing us that it is not the end of the story.

This is good news in a world like the one we are living in right now. This is hard news for people of privilege like we all are, and this good news, I believe, invites us to the hard work of discerning how we're to respond to the disruptions we're facing in these days. This is where I think one of the saints that has gone before us long ago can show us the way. Julian of Norwich lived 650 years ago. She became famous as a saint because of the role she played in translating *How to Find God in the Midst of Disruption*. She translated it for the common, everyday people, not using the priests or the Church, just using her own relationship with God as a means of bringing hope. Her role really was an anchoress, like that last song, *Soul Anchored to God*, a person who would live in a small cell that was attached to the church, but it was right outside the church building. Like a monk or a nun, an anchoress would take vows with her bishop to remain in that cell attached to the church for the rest of her life no matter what, even if someone came and ransacked the church or burned it down, the anchoress was to remain

in place in that spot. This vow was taken so seriously that there was actually a ritual burial service that a person would go through to symbolize the death of their old life for this new way of living.

So, as an anchoress, Julian devoted herself to prayer and contemplation, but she didn't disconnect herself from the world. She was still to be anchored in society. How do you do that from a tiny, little cell? Well, her cell was connected to the church, and it had three windows. The first was a window that had a view right into the worship space so that she could take communion, she could talk to the priest, and she could get the experience of worship. The second window let in the sun and had a view of the garden, and this is where she received what she needed for daily life. She had to depend on the outside world around her to bring her food and supplies. So, that was the second window. The third window was outside looking at the village in the world. Remember, in these times, churches were always in the middle of town. So, you could see the square from this window, and the role of an anchoress was to listen to God and to listen to culture and to discern the hand of God working in people's lives and the world around them. So, day after day, wherever an anchoress was, people would come to the window that faced town, and in Julian's case, they would come to her open window, seeking her counsel and seeking her spiritual insight, and they would share with her the tragedies and the troubles and the disruptions they were facing.

During Julian's days, the Black Death swept through Norwich three different times, killing half the population of the town. Those who escaped the disease were so gripped by fear and sorrow and the crushing labor of caring for the ill that they were absolutely overwhelmed. In fact, many believed that Julian actually became an anchoress because her whole family died of the Black Death. So, visitors to her window were very familiar with disruption, and as they would speak of these terrifying events that were happening around them, Julian would anchor them to God's hope. Her most famous statement, which maybe you've heard before, was to say to people, "All shall be well, and all shall be well." It sounds kind of trite, doesn't it? How can things be well when disruption after disruption happens? When sickness and sorrow comes, even in the face of death, how can all be well? Well, Julian took this question very seriously, and because she considered it her job to listen to God and to bring the people's questions to God, she brought just this question to God: God, how can all be well in the face of what we're facing?

And God gave Julian more than fifteen visions, and, if you ever pick up one of her books, some of them are kind of disturbing. I'm just going to say. God speaks in very unique ways, but the first one she receives is the vision of something very small, she writes. Something that looked remarkably like a little hazel nut. So, she sees this little hazel nut, and she sees it in the hand of God, and she says, "God, what is this?" And God says to her, "This is everything that's been made. This is all of creation. Julian responds, saying, "How can that be all of creation? This is such a small thing, it could easily dissolve into nothingness. How could it possible remain held together?" And, God says to her, "Creation lasts and lasts and will always will last because God loves it." In spite of the disruptions, in spite of the sin, in spite of the death that Julian was surrounded by, she gave the message of hope that all would still remain because God loves it.

So, the first lesson Julian teaches us is that God is holding more together than we can even imagine, not only our own lives but the entirety of all creation. In spite of the disruptions and sin and evil, Julian says the world remains because God loves it.

The second lesson Julian carried to the people was an answer to their questions of “why?” “Why is this happening to us?” “Why does pain continue to envelope this world that we live in?” And, “Why, God, does it seem like you are not doing enough to stop it?” Julian brought this question of “why” to God and sat and listened, and she poured out the tragedies that she was seeing and hearing about to God, and, in a moment of quiet, God said to her, “Julian, what is impossible for you to see is not impossible for me.” And, Julian writes that as much as she would have wished for more, that was enough to trust that God was seeing the whole thing, and it was not impossible for God to navigate.

So, the smaller story that we’re all living in right now is the story of our individual lives. Our lives are beautiful and painful. They are extraordinary, and they are ordinary, and they are all wrapped into one. Lives that we know on a day like today are not going to go on forever. Some year to come, someone will read our name from this platform on All-Saints Sunday. Even though we will one day die, these lives that we are now living are important, and they matter, and they’re meaningful because they are held together by the love of God, and they’re given true purpose by joining with God in his good work.

The larger story that we’re a part of is that God loves us all, this world and all of us in it. A story that we see in the Old Testament and the New Testament consistently is filled with disruptions but a story that’s not over yet, and a story that we already have the ending for because in God’s large story, we are promised that in the end all will be well. So, for us, today, in the face of disruption, we, like the people of God in the book of Haggai, I think most often see comfort in the things we think we can control, our homes, our agendas and even our will, but like the people in the book of Haggai, only focusing on that will leave all of us dissatisfied because we were made for more. Our true call is to seek comfort and new direction in the ways of God, to live like Julian, connected to the church, connected to the people of God, connected to our communities and the world around us and seeking God in the center of both of those things, bringing hope to this world, using our gifts as we are called to no judge, to not focus on ourselves but to focus on a world in need.

If Haggai or Julian were here right now, I think they’d say, “I know you’re exhausted by evil, and I know you’re disillusioned by the comforts that have failed you, but just trust me. This very moment, God is closer to you than even your skin is. God’s goodness enfolds you like a warm blanket, and God is delighted when we seek him first, smack dab in the middle of every disruption we face, because, even in the face of the grandest disruption of all, death itself, we are still promised new life is coming and that all will be well.

Let us pray. God, the disruptions do keep coming, and, so, we hold fast to what the saints before us have shared with us – that you have a plan that is much larger than we are and that we have been invited to participate in it. So, God, move us. Help us take the focus off of ourselves and put the focus on you. Remind us that we do not have to do it alone. We are called together in community to follow you, and, God, even in some ways disrupt us anew so that we don’t lose sight of your love for us. All in Jesus’ name. Amen.

