

**TEXT: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**

Dear Friends in Christ and children of the Reformation,

A lot of roads are meeting on this one Sunday today. We've been studying the Book of Haggai. This morning I want to complete that study with a few thoughts on the fourth oracle or message of the Lord to Haggai and the remnant of his day. Today is also the first Sunday of the End-times Season. Furthermore, this Sunday is appointed as the Sunday to celebrate the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

We will also begin our study of topics pertaining to the end of the world today. This topic will continue throughout November. Next Sunday will focus on the Last Judgment. November 15<sup>th</sup> will be Saints Triumphant Sunday. The last Sunday of End-times, this year falling on November 22, is Christ the King Sunday.

So today is kind of a transitional Sunday. On the one hand, we are completing the Pentecost season and our special summer series of sermons (a series on the Lord's Prayer [7 weeks] and a series on Haggai [4 weeks]) and on the other hand we are beginning the last part of the church year, the End-times emphasis. I chose Jesus words from Matthew 24 as our text to tie all of these different roads together. Jesus said, "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**" Let's see how these words apply to each of the roads that come together this morning. We could find the thought, **God's Word will never fail**, that is, be left unfulfilled, as a fitting theme for this morning's text. You will see that it finds application not only in 1) Haggai and, 2) Luther's day, but also in 3) our day as well.

1. God's word did not fail in Haggai's day.

Look at Jesus' words. He says, "**Heaven and earth will pass away**," literally the sky and the earth will pass away, that is, come to an end. But "**my words will never fail**," that is, *be left unfulfilled*. *Never!* A strong negation in the Greek to emphasize that God's word will *certainly not* be left unfulfilled. What God says will happen, will indeed happen, without fail!

We certainly see that that was true in Haggai's day. Look at the LORD's last message to Haggai and the remnant. I am reading from chapter 2, verses 20-23: **20 The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: 21 "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. 22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. 23 " 'On that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the LORD, 'and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the LORD Almighty."**

This last revelation was received on the same day as the third. It's a message of comfort and assurance. "The Lord disclosed to Haggai that although he (God) would distress the nations through one another, He would use Zerubbabel as a "signet ring" (v. 23). A signet ring was a finger ring containing a seal used for the purpose of identifying and/or authenticating the object into which it was stamped. As a signet ring Zerubbabel would be a guarantee that the Lord would fulfill his promises to David regarding the coming of the Christ. The kings of the world would come and go but the Lord's Temple, the Church built upon Christ, would endure forever." These words certainly are true whether you think of their fulfillment in terms of the centuries leading up to the first coming of Christ or his second coming at the end of the world. Think of how God shook the nations up before Christ's coming. Six hundred years before Christ, the Babylonian empire (modern day Iraq) was the most powerful empire in the world. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem and took Daniel and others captive to Babylon. He destroyed Jerusalem and after looting it, the temple. That was 586 B.C.

But it wasn't long and the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Medes and the Persians. In 539 Darius the Mede (Media, present day Kurds) conquered Babylon without a fight. Mesopotamia and Judah were under Persian rule. In 538

B.C. King Cyrus, in keeping with their policy that allowed all people the freedom to worship their own gods, and live their own way, issued a decree ordering the restoration of the Jewish community. Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2-4). The new temple was dedicated in 516 B.C. exactly 70 years after Solomon's temple had been destroyed (586 B.C.), just as God had prophesied through Jeremiah the prophet (Jeremiah 25:12)!

But God shook the world again! In 332 B.C. Alexander the Great of Greece conquered the kingdom of Persia. With Alexander came change. He brought with him rapid Hellenization, the spread of Greek culture, language and religion into the entire civilized world. This represented a great threat to the worship of the true God in Israel. Alexander died at a young age and his generals fought over the control of his conquered lands. After more than 40 years of struggles and warfare (323-280 B.C.) four major divisions emerged: Egypt (Ptolemies), Syria (Seleucids), Macedonia (Antigonids), and Pergamum (Attalids). For the next 150 years the Jews were under the control of either the Ptolemies or the Seleucids. From 175 to 163 B.C. the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes tried to force the Jews to abandon their Law and adopt Greek culture. In 167 B.C. he desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig on an altar to the Greek god Zeus. In response to that disrespectful act at the Temple, a Jewish priest by the name of Judas Maccabeus led a revolt. Maccabeus won, and in 164 B.C. the Temple was cleansed and rededicated. This rededication is celebrated every year with the day Hanukkah.

Then in 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem. On March 15, 44 B.C. Julius Caesar was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius, who fled to the East. Two years later, Octavian and Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi. In 37 B.C. Herod the Great was appointed king of Judea by Octavian and Mark Anthony. In 27 B.C. Caesar Augustus (Octavian) became the first Roman Emperor. During his reign Herod the Great began to refurbish the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem somewhere between 6-4 B.C., crucified and rose again before the Temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

God's fourth message to Haggai, "**I will shake the heavens and the earth. 22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother,**" certainly is fulfilled by this history, but what's more important is what God guaranteed to the people of that day. His promise of a Savior would not be left unfulfilled even through all this political upheaval and war. Zerubbabel was a "signet ring" of the Lord. Because he survived the people could be sure that God's Word would come to pass even though the Savior would still not come for another 500 years.

What does all this history have to say to us today, us, who wait for our Lord's second coming? The Lord reminds us through his prophet that there will be distressful days ahead, as there was before our Lord's first coming (and there indeed were), also before his second coming. Remember Jesus' words that there will always be "**wars and rumors of wars.**" (Mt. 24) But God's people do not have to fear those days or lose heart, because their Lord is faithful to his promise. Kingdoms in this world will rise and fall, but God's Kingdom will stand forever! Those who trust in him will not be ashamed. They also will live and reign with him forever.

## 2. God's Word did not fail in Luther's Day!

Well 1500 years had passed after Jesus rose from the dead. It was a time in which it appeared that God's Word, especially, the Gospel message, had disappeared. But God did not forsake his promise, "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**" This time God's champion to preserve his Word was an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther. God preserved his Word, the gospel message, through the work of Martin. In his search for spiritual peace God used men like Staupitz to lead Martin to the Word. There in the Scriptures alone he found the good news that we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, not through good works. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for our sins. God reconciled the world, all people, to himself through Christ. When the Holy Spirit creates faith in this good news we are saved. Our good works are not the cause of our salvation but the result of our salvation.

But the world was not so receptive of this good news as Luther and his fellow reformers were. The old evil foe, Satan, meant deadly woe to Luther. He tried to snuff the good news out using all the powers of the day, both the power of the secular government and ecclesiastical power, the church. It looked like Luther and the gospel would take a great blow when Luther was summoned to Worms in 1521. There he was asked to recant all that he had written and preached concerning this “new” teaching, the gospel. But the Lord remembered his promise and preserved his Word. Luther himself thought he would die at Worms. As he was leaving Wittenberg for the Diet of Worms in a covered wagon he spoke to the many students, friends and colleagues who gathered to wish him farewell. He said to Melanchthon, “If I don’t return and my enemies murder me, I put you under oath, dear brother. Swear that you will not stop teaching and remaining in the truth of God’s Word.” His friends thought that they were seeing him for the last time! But Luther committed his life to the Lord who had saved Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace. God did not forsake him, nor did he forsake His promise. Though he was threatened with death if he did not recant, Luther stood before the most powerful leaders of the day and answered those who demanded he recant with these words, ***“Since your royal majesty and your grace desire a simple answer, I shall give you one without horns of teeth: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Holy Scripture or with clearly illumined reason—for I believe neither pope or council alone, since it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted each other—I am held by the power of the passages of Scripture I have quoted. My conscience is held captive by the Word of God. I can retract nothing, nor do I desire to do so, because it is not safe but dangerous to act against conscience... I cannot do anything else. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.”*** Because the common people of Germany were behind him and the Emperor had to give his attention to the Turk (Moslem invaders), even though the Edict issued by Karl at Worms declared that Luther was to be killed, the Lord preserved Martin’s life and, more importantly, his Word. That Word has been preserved to our day still. God is faithful to his promise, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”**

### 3. God’s Word will not fail today!

Satan does not give up! He is still trying to destroy that Word today. The Word and those who faithfully preach are still being persecuted. The enemies of the gospel have multiplied both inside and outside of the church. Many have forsaken the truth for the tolerance doctrine of today. This is not a battle for the weak. Jesus told us this would happen. He said, **“You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come.”** (Mt. 24:9-14) **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”** God’s promise is sure. His Word will never fail. It will remain to the end of the world. That is certain! What is not sure, not certain, is whether we will stand firm on God’s Word to the end! To that end let us pray Luther’s Diet of Worm’s prayer on this Reformation Day and every day till the Lord comes, **“Here I stand! God help me! Amen.”**

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Pastor Glen Hieb