

## “Glory Days,” October 14, 2007

Okay, how many of you have heard of Possum Trot, Kentucky? How about Monkey’s Eyebrow? Now these are classic little towns in Western Kentucky. They are small towns with the proverbial one stoplight...you know, the kind if you blink you’ll miss. Now, the joke growing up for me was...Where is Paducah (my hometown) located? Paducah is halfway between Possum Trot and Monkey’s Eyebrow. Lest you think I’m making this stuff up, go check it out for yourself. You’ll find Monkey’s Eyebrow right there in Marshall County and Possum Trot just a little ways away in Ballard County.

Now...why the geography lesson of one stoplight towns in Western Kentucky? Besides the fact that my mind works in mysterious ways...as I was trying to find today’s Bible passage, it was a little like telling someone to find Possum Trot on a map. Our Bible passage today comes from Haggai...*Haggai*? Yes, Haggai. No, not *Haggai the Horrible* the hapless cartoon Viking. Haggai the prophet of the Old Testament.

Haggai is to the Old Testament what Possum Trot is to a map of Western Kentucky...a small, hard to find one stoplight town—and if you blink, you *will* miss it. BUT...while Possum Trot is small and unknown, it is not insignificant. Okay, yeah, there was the tie-in. Small, but not insignificant.

So anyway, I got to thinking about small towns. If it’s not obvious by the name, Paducah *is* a small town too...so I can speak with some deal of authority on this issue. In many small towns much revolves around the local high school. During the fall it’s all about the football game, or during the winter the basketball team. And lately, look at band competitions, the high school band has fervent supporters. It seems like the whole town gets wrapped up in what’s going on with the football team, the band or whatever. Now, I don’t know how many of you have had the experience to be part of one of these high school groups in a small town. I did...and I can tell you that sometimes you begin to feel that the world revolves around you and that team. In a small town, you kind of get to be big man on campus...a little like being local celebrity.

Of course though, this is a pretty provincial view. The fact is that outside of Paducah, no one really cares about who you are or what and where Paducah is, or how many points you scored in the game. Nonetheless, many of us had our identities wrapped up in those glory days of high school.

Now here is the ~~Going Lighter~~ ~~September 2007~~ ~~at~~ a rude awakening. For me it was the first cool fall day of freshman year at college. I went walking proudly across campus with my high school letter jacket on...I thought I was pretty cool—BIG mistake. “Hey, high school, why don’t go on back to the prom.” Hey, nice jacket, can I see your hall pass?” And some comments I can’t share at this time. What I quickly learned in that one short walk was that all the hard work, all the sweat, pain, joy, victories, losses...that went into earning that letter jacket, it meant nothing here. I have to tell you, for an 18 year old, that’s kind of confusing and disappointing. My sense of self was stitched into that jacket. I had come to rest on those accomplishments...had come to believe that somehow they were going to get me by...

I ran around with a great group of guys in college—guys who really helped me to move past that jacket. But there was this one guy, Jeff, who never could seem to get past that letter jacket identify. I can assure you that after that one walk across campus in the fall of my freshman year, my high school letter jacket didn’t see the light of day at college. But Jeff, well, you know that Bruce Springsteen song Glory Days, I think Bruce wrote that song for my buddy Jeff. Every time we got together, even throughout our senior year, we had to hear about how great Oldham County was, that touchdown he scored, *and* he did wear his letter jacket—still. Now don’t get me wrong, I love this guy, we’re still friends, but for whatever reason, his comfort zone...his identify remained in those glory days.

This, I believe, is the tension that is being named in our Bible passage today. This tension between living in the past and struggling to live into what God might have in store for us. Now, there’s a ton of history that comes before this passage from Haggai—more than we can go into great depth about this morning, but the general idea is this: The Israelites had been led into exile. Literally, over a period of years, the Babylonians forced the Israelites from their homes in Jerusalem, and destroyed their sacred temple. And, for the ancient Israelites, the temple represented an earthly portal for the presence of God. Eventually the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians, and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to rebuild their towns and homes. Got that? Clear as mud?

Now here is the lowdown. The people who had moved back had rebuilt their homes and were pretty comfortable with their surroundings, but they had not rebuilt the temple. They were kind of saying...why rebuild, why try to create a new temple, things are just fine the way they are. Here is where Haggai steps in...Haggai was a prophet, and the job of a prophet was to point out to folks from time to

time when their priorities had gotten out of whack. Here is what Haggai said to the people:

***“Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious? And what do you see now? Not much, right? This Temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness.”***

Wait a minute you might be saying...it sounds like Haggai is telling those folks to go back and live in the glory days...***“Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious?”*** I think quite the opposite is true. I think Haggai is challenging the people to live in a new and exciting way. Haggai is saying, that old letter jacket that your're comfortable with is tattered, let's get a new one. He says, ***“This temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish.”***

I wonder how many of you have experienced a feeling...a tug of some sort in your life that you can't really explain where you feel like...what I'm doing is okay, but I think there is something else out there for me. The way we've probably framed that feeling here at The Garden is maybe the idea of moving from success to significance.

The idea that what we are “successful” at...what we are doing right now pays the bills, but gosh, I just feel like I should be doing something that would feel more significant. It's like we are now aware that the old letter jacket doesn't fit anymore, but we can't imagine a new jacket based on a new us...a jacket with new accomplishments on the sleeve. For me personally, that feeling became very acute when I was teaching high school. I absolutely loved what I did, I was good at it, I had earned my letter jacket there, so to speak—I was very comfortable with my life...but something deep down inside of me kept saying...hey Stan, the letter jacket doesn't fit anymore. I have to tell you, wrestling with that reality is not easy. Trying to explain it to family and friends is even more difficult.

Recently I was visiting a fellow Gardener in the hospital. He had gone into the emergency room with pain in his back and ended up having to have immediate surgery. However, once the surgeons got into his back, they didn't find exactly what they expected.

A neurologist was brought in for consultation and determined that a rare blood disorder could be causing infection around his spine that ultimately causes paralysis and even death if not treated properly. As a result, he was admitted into intensive care. Instead of a quick, out-patient surgery, was in

intensive care for about a week, and is still in rehab as we speak about 3 weeks later.

Of course we chatted about the surgery, the prognosis and all that kind of thing. But what I really wanted to know was what was on his mind. When a doctor mentions the possibility of paralysis and death in the same sentence, it usually gets one's attention. So I asked him something to the effect of...“what goes through your mind to hear this kind of thing...paralysis and death.” He said, “you know, it really makes you think. It has really made me reassess my priorities.” We talked about that for a while and he said he wondered if this surgery was part of God's plan. He said he felt that he had been running too fast for too long and that maybe God was using this surgery as a way of slowing him down.

I asked him that if it might be possible, that instead of God using back pain and surgery as a means of slowing him down, that if it might be possible if God had been speaking all along, but it was now that he had time to listen that maybe he was hearing God for the first time. After exploring that idea, he said there was this feeling inside he just couldn't explain. It was like this gray, murky area in his gut...it was like he could see and hear what he was supposed to do, but just wasn't sure the path to make it happen.

I asked is there one path into the murkiness you *can* see? I just want to help people—I want to give back, he said. I've spent so much time running, I just want to stop and help people.

You know, each one of us was created in a unique way. We all relate to and experience God in vastly different ways. I believe God seeks to get our attention often, but often we are not on that frequency.

Nonetheless, I am confident that what we experienced there in the hospital that day was an encounter with God. In that gray, murky area was God saying ***“This temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning but an even more glorious finish.”*** God offers us the opportunity to have a new letter jacket...are we willing to put it on?

CLOSING:

Haggai was pretty clear about it, he said...***“Get to work, all you people!—God is speaking.”*** You see, I think that feeling inside of us...the one that creates the tension between success and significance is God speaking to us...God prodding us to rebuild to something far better.

Have a great Sunday, go in peace. AMEN.

