

“Keeping Our Balance”
Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 7:1-10;
2 Thess. 2:1-5, 13-17
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According to Paul it can sometimes seem - -

- - like the world is trying to throw us off balance.

And according to the prophet Haggai - -

- - there will be times when it seems like the world is off balance.

But both of them - - urge us to stand firm and not be shaken - - by all of it.

“Stand firm and hold to the traditions you believe in,” says Paul.

“Take courage, take courage, take courage”, says Haggai - - three times.

They wrote their words almost 600 years apart.

Paul wrote in the chaos after Jesus death as the Temple was about to fall for a second time in Jerusalem, and the Roman empire was strong, and persecuted the followers of Jesus. / Haggai wrote at the end of the exile in Babylon, 600 years before Paul - - as exiles were just beginning to RETURN to Jerusalem - - in hopes of building the Temple - - the very one that Paul’s contemporaries would see destroyed - - centuries later.

There was chaos, and then there was chaos again, and here we are!

And the words of both the New Testament Apostle - - and the Old Testament prophet - - are words about the courage to stand firm - - and not be shaken.

Because - - there will be times when we feel shaken.

There will be times when it seems like - - the world is trying to throw us off balance - - and get us to abandon our traditions and our faith and our spiritual practices.

One of the things that threw new followers off balance was rumors.

There were rumors about Paul going around.

But he urges them to remember what he is really like.

Remember what he really taught them.

Do not be thrown off balance by some false spirit - - or some criminal - - or some lawless one - - trying to deceive you - - and gain false sympathy - - and get you to abandon - - what you know in your heart - - to be right!

Keep your balance.

Stand firm.

Have courage.

It's challenging advice - - because the world's teeter-totters - - are sometimes very DIFFICULT to figure out. / What really IS the right thing?

For example:

Is this person really homeless and we should try to help - - OR have they been deceiving us - - and abusing our property?

Or how about Israel and Palestine? What should we do there?

It's a teeter-totter!

Old and young.

Black and White.

Male and Female.

Democrat and Republican.

Left and Right.

And I don't really WANT to FIGHT with ANYBODY!

But - - sometimes - - you find yourself doing what you DON'T want to do.

Sometimes you find yourself - - loosing your balance.

Anyone agree?

Paul's answers are: "stay close" and "tradition".

His first answer is stay close:

Stay close to God.

Stay close to one another.

Stay close to the traditions you trust and know.

A fiddler on the roof - - sound's crazy - - no?

But in our little village - - you might say - -

Everyone is a fiddler on the roof - -

Trying to scratch out a pleasant little tune - -

Without BREAKING their NECK!

It AIN'T easy!!

How do we keep our BALANCE?

I can tell you in a word: tradition!

What would Paul have thought of Tevye - - in Fiddler on the Roof?

I'm pretty sure Paul would have approved.

Stay close.

Stand firm.

In the Old Testament - - another prophet who spoke about the SAME time as Haggai - - was named Zechariah - - and he came just a little later - - but addressed the SAME situation. / The way they lost their footing was forgetting.

After 70 long years in exile - - it was difficult to remember how it was before all the chaos - - and it was difficult to stay close to what they knew - - because it was like they could hardly remember what it was - - they used to believe and do.

They had been away from home all that time.

Now they were returning home.

But - - what would that really be like?

They longed for it - - but they were anxious about it.

One specific question was about the tradition of fasting.

They had been fasting as a religious practice for so long.

But fasting was for mourners.

And now - - as they returned home - - their mourning was coming to an end.

But they hardly knew how NOT to mourn.

Do you know what Zechariah says?

He advises them to keep fasting - - but now to fast for JOY!

Keep close to your tradition - - but do your tradition in a new way.

When you fast - - you fast for God.

And now GOD - - has brought you JOY!

Don't do your traditions in an empty way - - and they won't be empty!

If you do that - - you will keep - - your balance.

Years ago at summer camp - - I lost my balance - - and I think the experience helps get a picture of what Paul is talking about.

I was in a canoe.

And I KNEW that in order to keep your balance you should stay low and in the center of the boat. / But what I KNEW - - was different from what I DID.

We were under attack from another canoe - - in a canoe paddle water fight.

So there was some chaos - - which I could use as an excuse.

But in any case I not only lost my balance - - I lost my glasses.

And as they sank to the bottom of the lake - - we also lost the water fight.

The rest of the week was - - miserable and strange.

I rode horseback - - but it was treacherous - - because I couldn't see the tree branches until too late. / Archery was out of the question.

Maybe God wanted me to be grateful for my vision.

In any case a week of being more dependent and vulnerable - - kept me closer to others - - and maybe to God.

Maybe sometimes we have to loose our balance - - to appreciate it.

Maybe a fight - - even a water fight - - can help us see what is really important.

How many of you - - have ever been brought closer to someone - - or to God?

Can you remember what it was that brought you closer?

Would you LIKE to be brought closer?

It CAN happen.

Pray it will happen.

Wait for it.

Stay close - - to what you know is true.

Stand firm.

Have courage.

Our tradition - - and our faith - - is NOT an empty ritual - - carried out again and again. / Our tradition - - is a deep well - - and a rich resource - - for keeping our balance in a teeter-totter world.

What does the long pattern of YOUR life tell you - - as you look back?

What is YOUR traditional way of living?

What is YOUR traditional way - - of disagreeing?

What is YOUR traditional way - - of relating to God?

What do you usually do?

Is it working - - or do you want to change it?

We don't HAVE to be set off balance - - by the chaos.

A ONE TIME occurrence - - is NOT the tradition!

Mistakes happen.

Just don't make THEM - - the new tradition.

When some chaotic - - one time - - balance killer happens - - stay close.

I don't know if Tevye read Zechariah's advice - - about revising the tradition of fasting or not. / Maybe he did...

The REIVSION of a tradition - - is not the desecration of it.

Instead it is - - a way of keeping it - - and keeping it real.

Even Tevye - - is able to REVISE his tradition - - because he LOVES his daughters. / In fact BOTH of his daughters - - ask to marry men - - who break tradition - - - but who they LOVE.

And Tevye does what he does - - in order to stay close - - to the ones he loves.

So - - stay close - - you and me.

May we learn how to stay close.

Stay close to tradition.

AND stay close to the ones you love.

AND stay close to God.

That's Paul's advice.

When we follow - - hopefully we will be able to keep our balance.

Amen