Sometimes it feels like we have been waiting a long time. How many years have you been waiting? How many years have you been trying to turn that corner, trying to live your life in a way more like what God might have in mind for you?

The people of Judah had been waiting for sixteen years, more or less. The people of Judah had been waiting sixteen years by the time the prophet Haggai came on the scene. The people of Judah had been waiting sixteen years to get back to work rebuilding the temple.

This chapter of the story of the Hebrew people started in the year 538, that is about 538 years before the birth of Christ. In the year 538 BCE King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon. King Cyrus freed the Jewish exiles. After fifty years in exile by the waters of Babylon the former leaders of Judah, or perhaps the children of the former leaders of Judah, were free to return to Judah.

By the time the exiles returned to Jerusalem much of the city had been rebuilt. Most of the people of Judah had not been sent into exile. After their leaders were led into exile, after the Babylonians plundered the city, the rest of the people of Judah worked to restore a sense of normalcy. The people of Judah rebuilt their homes. They planted gardens and orchards. They rebuilt the marketplace. They started new businesses.

Fifty years later the exiles returned to Jerusalem. They were glad to be home. They ate meals with long lost relatives. They were probably sad to see the neighborhoods where they used to live. Their houses had been destroyed long ago, or they had been occupied by other families.

But the saddest part of all for them was the temple. The temple had been destroyed by the Babylonian army fifty years before and it had not been rebuilt. The ruins of the temple remained.

King Cyrus had given the exiles permission to return home. King Cyrus had also given them, and all of the other religious minorities, the right to rebuild their places of worship. For the exiles from Judah, this meant they could rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

So they went to the site of the Temple and began clearing the rubble. They laid a new foundation. They worked deliberately, carefully. Then construction came to a halt. We don’t know exactly why. One theory is that King Cyrus died and his sons put an end to the reconstruction. Another theory is that there was a conflict between the newcomers and the old timers. The people who had never left Jerusalem did not always agree with the exiles who had just come back to the city a year or two before.

We can picture the sudden and complete halt in the construction project. It seems to be what happens. One group of people comes up with a plan of action and another group of people come up with all sorts of reasons it should never happen.

We don’t know whether the people of Judah stopped rebuilding the Temple because the Persians put a halt to it or because the people of Judah started fighting amongst
themselves. What we know is that there was some sort of conflict and all of the work came to a complete halt for sixteen years.

Then in the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this temple in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD.

Get back to 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.

For sixteen years you have been held back by the Persians or by your quarreling amongst yourselves. For sixteen years you have walked past the empty construction sight, through the fall, through the winter, through the spring, year after year, in the rain and in the heat of summer. For sixteen years you have been waiting.

Take courage. I am with you. My spirit abides among you. Do not fear. Now is the time to get to work.

This is true for us in the vital issues of our time. We have waited long enough. At St. Paul’s we have been waiting for at least a couple of years. For at least a few years we have been walking past the empty space, past the rubble of a former time, former ministries, former generations. It has been four years since the Samaritan Center left our Parish House to beautiful new quarters on North State Street. It has been eight or nine years since the Diocese of Central New York vacated the upper floors of our Parish House building. It has been at least a generation since St. Paul’s has made any significant changes to our buildings, to adapt our space and our work to the needs of the current generation.

We have waited long enough. We are working together. We are working with the Spirit of God in this place. We see our congregation changing, and our neighborhood changing around us. Take courage. Now is the time for us to get to work.

The same is true for you in your life and for me in my life. I don’t know what has been holding you back. I could tell you all about the things that have been holding me back.

It makes no difference really. The cause of the waiting makes no difference. The cause of you or me being ‘stuck’ makes no difference.

The difference, for those of us who have been trying to turn that corner for months or years, is in God’s message to us today. Take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD. Work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made to you. It is my promise of freedom. It is my promise of dignity for all people.

God is calling to you today. What is God calling you to do with this big, beautiful life that is given to you? What is the life God is calling you to live? What is God calling you to leave behind? What is God calling you to do with the rest of this beautiful day, this beautiful month, this beautiful year?

The time for waiting is over. You could have been waiting for sixteen days, or sixteen months or sixteen years. No matter. Take courage. God’s spirit abides among you. Do not fear.