

## The Temple of God's Presence

Haggai 1:15b-2:9      *How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?*

The events recorded in the book of Haggai fall between the months of August and December 520 BCE (Peter C. Craigie, DAILY STUDY BIBLE). This makes our listening to a portion of the book this morning something of an anniversary celebration. This thought gave me a certain sense of connection this week as I listened for what the reading might have to say to me, to us.

The people of Israel have been returning home from exile in Babylon for nearly two decades. They have plunged into the work rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. They have been away for fifty years, and are literally starting over again. Yet they do not have much to show for their efforts. Crops are not producing. What little money they generate goes out immediately for subsistence living. (See 1:5-6) After the high spirits of homecoming, the people have sunk about as low as they could get.

A puny, half-hearted effort has been made to reconstruct the great temple, destroyed when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. The rubble is being cleared, the beginnings of a foundation laid. No one's heart seems to be in it. Along comes Haggai saying that the most urgent need right now is to get the temple done. This just doesn't make any sense. Shouldn't we first rebuild our houses, put food on the table, and get our businesses going? Then we can think about spiritual things!

For Haggai, however, the temple was the empowering sign of God's presence. Without it there was a huge spiritual vacuum at the center of life. The people were working feverishly without a sense of hope or purpose. The enormity of the task was draining their hearts and spirits. Maybe the core problem WAS spiritual. Their lives had become all work and no spirit, no sense of connection with God's presence, purpose, and promise. It's hard to work on an empty stomach, even harder to work on an empty spirit. Constructing the temple, a place dedicated to awareness of God's presence—this was now God's call to the people through the prophet.

God's living word comes to us with different messages for different times. The prophets of Israel spoke different words in different times and circumstances. The pre-exile prophets spoke against the temple and its ceremonies, and the ignoring of justice, mercy, and compassion in daily life. Now the need and situation are different. The people have lost heart and hope. Their efforts seem small and futile. Their life seems a chaotic mess, with little evidence that it will get better even with all their hard work. Haggai's word is that God wants them to get on with the temple project as a revitalizing of their awareness of God's presence with them and God's promise for the future.

So, Haggai gives his speech. First, he speaks to those, now octogenarians, perhaps older, who actually remember the splendor of Solomon's temple. We can imagine them standing around shaking their heads about how pitiful the present construction efforts look in comparison. It's the old light bulb joke. I'll make it generic. How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? Three. One to change the bulb, two to stand around and talk about how wonderful the old one was. Things are never the same as they were in the past. It is very hard to live in the present, especially when things are difficult. So we withdraw into the past, which we often embellished in our memories.

Haggai says: Who among you was around to see the former glory of God's house? How does it look to you now? Here's all this rubble and the feeble beginnings of a foundation. Doesn't look like much, does it? In fact, it looks like nothing, right? Haggai knows his audience. He acknowledges the sentimentalism and the despondency. Those two frames of mind often go hand in hand. Discouraged and despondent about the state of our efforts and the condition of things, we pine for the "glory days" of the past. Now Haggai changes his message. It is time to take courage, says God. You, the governor, take courage. You, the priests, take courage. You, the people, take courage. I am with you, says God. My spirit dwells among you even now. Do not be afraid. God is creating something new. The glory of the past is nothing compared to the glory that is to come.

Haggai paints a wondrous picture of what God is going to do, bringing the wealth of nations to this temple-in-the-making.

This is a core message in scripture. God says it to Moses when he fears going back into Egypt to face Pharaoh. God says it to the prophets themselves, like Isaiah and Jeremiah. And Jesus says it to his disciples. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give you the kind of peace the world gives, but something much deeper and more real. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. I am with you always, to the end of the world.

In the midst of the despondency and feelings of being overwhelmed by the tasks of rebuilding their lives, the people of Israel and their leaders are reminded through Haggai that God is with them. Right then, right there. Yes, the work is as hard as you think it is. Yes, you have a long road ahead of you. No, things don't look the same as in the past. But God is with you. God's spirit is in you and among you. Don't be afraid. This was just the right message. By turning to the rebuilding of the temple, the people would be brought back into awareness of God's presence and glory and care. They would be turned toward the future once again.

Are there not situations we face that arouse anxiety and fear, that plunge us into despondency? The conditions in the world created by human violence, greed, and seeking of power. Or what happens when we feel God is calling us to some vision and mission. There is the flush of enthusiasm and excitement in the early going. What excitement there was when the vision of the Festival Center first emerged in some of us, and we looked at that old building in its state of disrepair, seeing it through the lens of our hopes and dreams! Then came the hard work, physical and spiritual, all the challenges and obstacles that looked like they would sink us, and still may! Or the ways we feel when we look at the rubble of our lives, when things fall apart, when some experience shakes us to our foundations. Or those things about ourselves that we discern in our inward journey work, things that we never wanted to deal with, but now are too aware of to ignore. They seem so insurmountable, so unchangeable! Our fears. Our guilt. Our lousy self-images. Our addictions. Our long-held hurts often erupting in anger.

We are exactly where Haggai and his people were, only in different ways and circumstances. But wherever we are, whatever the conditions of our lives or our life as a community, the most important thing is to remember and be aware of God's presence and God's call to courage and fearlessness. That's what the rebuilding project of Haggai came to symbolize for me this week, our need to always be returning to our spiritual life, to our awareness of and relationship to God's presence. Things are always changing, are never the same as they were. How tempted we are to cling to how we remember things that were rather than embrace things that are and might be! But this is the very nature of life. Change. Impermanence. Flux. Times of glory and times of seeming chaos ebb and flow all the time. What matters most, however, is that "something" that is beyond, within, and deeper than the changes that we experience. That "something" is what we call God's presence and God's promise, a presence that upholds us and gives us peace, a promise that draws us forward into God's dream for our lives and the life of God's world.

As a community, this is where we have found and will find ourselves from time to time—staring at the rubble and chaos of life as it appears sometimes through our tired spirits and perhaps bodies. Then something or someone will remind us of God's presence. This week we had guests in the retreat center who were visiting the L'Arche community. They are beginning to explore a call to establish a L'Arche community where they live. Phil Boyce and I had an opportunity to visit with our guests when they arrived and the day they left. They told us how inspired and encouraged they were by our community—the retreat center, L'Arche, and the other dimensions of our life here that we shared with them, the church itself and Camp Kum Ba Yah. I am always nervous at such observations. I fear that people see the outward fruits of our work but not the weaknesses, frailties, and times when we feel ourselves to be a total mess! And yet these words lit a warm fire of appreciation in us, as well as encouragement. I was reminded to go back to awareness of God's presence with us, and be deeply thankful.

I was asked a very good question this week: What do I mean when I speak of the Church of the Covenant Community? What do I mean when I say "community"? It's a fair and good question. I prefer the

word “community” to church. “Church” carries too much organizational, structural, dogmatic baggage. “Community” points to people, relationships, spiritual searching and growth, and a real but fragile thread that holds us together beneath our differences, our struggles, our times of misunderstanding and when we simply behave badly with one another. I mean the community of Covenant Members and Community Members who make and work with commitments to their own spiritual lives. I mean those who are also committed but in other forms and ways, who lend their energies and gifts to the various ministries God has brought forth through us. I also mean by “community” Camp Kum Ba Yah, our “roommate” here on this property, that works to connect children, indeed all people, with this part of God’s creation. I mean L’Arche and the Festival Center, the Lodge of the Fisherman and the Haven. Also those who find their way here and discover a place of spiritual welcome and openness. That’s what I mean, I suppose, when I speak of the Church of the Covenant Community.

At times this community I’ve described seems chaotic, without a center. At times we who live out our faith in one or the other areas of this community feel overwhelmed, overworked, and despondent. We sometimes get pretty hard on ourselves, and sometimes on each other. Sometimes the missions we are involved in flourish, and sometimes they flounder. So it is quite often that we stand around like the crowd of people that day, about to hear what Haggai was going to say. Tired. Discouraged. Feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of those things we’ve felt God has called us to. Maybe giving in to nostalgia for a time when things seemed better, easier, clearer. Like Haggai’s words that day, we look at our lives and our work and it may look like nothing. And, without having been aware of it, we realize that we have lost touch with our awareness of God’s presence and promise, which are the wellspring of our life.

So it is good when once in a while someone sees in us that “something” that we, for the moment, have lost sight of. They don’t see so much the things we do, or are trying to do. They aren’t necessarily amazed at the fruit of our labors, which seem to us and may indeed be next-to-nothing, as Haggai said. What they perceive is the LIFE that is in us and flows through us, that we have given ourselves to and for which we strive in the inward and outward journeys of our lives. That LIFE is the presence of God, and God’s promise that keeps luring us forward. When the present feels so difficult, so challenging, so barren, then it is time to return to the temple of God’s presence. Go back to our awareness of God. Give the outward journey a rest, and pay attention to the inward journey. Look not to the glory of the past but to what God wants to do and is doing toward the future. The “glory days” are always ahead of us, if we always seek God’s presence and promise, and are faithfully working with whatever it is God is calling us to do now.