

November 7, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Living In the Here and Now**

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

Psalm 145:2      *Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.*

*Some of the events in the past that we need to release are not negative events but good times...*

*This inability (to let go) is another way of losing energy by spending it on the past...*

--Caroline Myss, WHY PEOPLE DON'T HEAL AND HOW THEY CAN

The events recorded in the book of Haggai took place sometime between August and December 520 BCE. That makes our listening to a portion of the book an anniversary celebration. It is the story of the struggle to recommit ourselves to God and what God is calling us to do and to be in the present moment, daring to let go of the past, both its painful and good experiences. We have just gone through our time of recommitment as a community. Making a fresh, new commitment to the life of faith, as individuals and as a community, means letting go of everything that keeps us from being fully in the present. God meets us in the present moment, where we become aware of what God is doing and wants to do in and through us. The reading from Haggai can help us look at this.

The people are returning home from exile in Babylon. They face the overwhelming work of rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. So far there is not much to show for their efforts. Crops are meager. There is hunger and thirst. Their income is barely subsistence.(See 1:5-6) After the high spirits of liberation from exile and homecoming, the people have sunk very low. For them the present moment is bleak and daunting.

A feeble effort has been made to rebuild the temple, destroyed when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. Some rubble is cleared, the beginnings of a foundation laid. No one's heart is really in it. Then along comes Haggai saying that the most urgent need is to get the temple done. That is what God is calling the community to do in that present moment. What sense does that make? Shouldn't they first rebuild their houses, put food on the table, and get businesses on a paying basis? Then they would have time and leisure for spiritual things! The people respect Haggai, so they get to work on the temple.

For Haggai the temple was the empowering sign of God's presence. A little before our reading, there is a beautiful passage where God says to the people, "Look, you all go home to your houses, and I don't have a house to dwell in!" God wants to meet, to be with the people, and the temple is the place devoted to that meeting, that relationship. Without the temple and what it represents, there is this huge spiritual vacuum at the center of life. The people were working without a sense of hope or purpose or meaning. 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. When life becomes all outward journey and minimal or no inward journey, everything dries up, loses focus, becomes empty activism. 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 Haggai.

First of all, I don't think this story is about building church buildings, though religious communities need places to meet for spiritual practice and deepening their life in God. I think this story does point to the essential need for worship, for the individual and corporate inward journey, for giving attention to God's presence and our relationship with God, however you want to put it. Most of us are activists. We want to get stuff done. The urgent needs of the world stir us up to respond. And that is good. Yet the wisdom of the spiritual life as this community envisions it is that the outward

must be grounded in the inward, must flow out of prayer, contemplation, quietness of mind and heart, listening, reflection. Haggai's message for that moment in Israel's life was that the community had lost touch with its connection to God. The rebuilding of the temple would revive that life-giving connection and awareness. Touching our relationship with God, with the sacredness of life and our own lives, as individuals and as a community, is the heart and soul of who we are as human beings. It is the wellspring of everything we do, IF what we do is to be a response to God's call in our lives. Howard Thurman called it "establishing an Island of Peace within our souls." Until we do that, he said, we are not really alive, but lost, drifting, and ineffective. We simply call it by another name--making a commitment to the inward journey, as persons and as a community.

Haggai now speaks to the few who, at least in their 70s now, might remember the former temple. Who remembers the former glory of God's house? How does it look to you now? It's all busted up and in ruins, with only the pitiful beginnings of a foundation. Doesn't look like much, does it? We can imagine them standing around, shaking their heads about how shabby the present compares to the past. Haggai perceives the nostalgia and the despondency. Discouraged about the state of our efforts and the challenges of the present, we pine for the "glory days" of the past. Then we measure everything in the present by what we remember as the "glory days", so that nothing ever measures up and we are always dissatisfied, critical, and disengaged from what is going on now. Or we try to replicate what we remember as past good, imposing the remembered past on the present. It is very hard to live in the present, especially when things are difficult. All of this is an avoidance, a distraction. It keeps us from touching the presence of God in the present moment and responding to God's present activity that is opening doors to the future. We are asleep to God's presence and activity in the present moment.

Haggai has a further word. 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. Do not be afraid. God is creating something new. God is going to shake things up again! The past is nothing compared to what God is about to do. This is the way God works. This is the way Reality works. Always in the present and toward the future. Always something new being born, God calling us to be part of it. God calls us to wake up. For me, that is the best definition of the spiritual life--waking up. Living faithfully is about being involved with the new things God is always doing, in us and among us and through us. God is in the present, waiting for us to take courage, to wake up.

I have come to believe that the hardest spiritual work we have to do is that of waking up, of being fully alive in the present moment. We have to learn to let go--the letting go that is forgiveness, dropping the hurts and grudges we hold onto so dearly and which contaminate our lives every day. It means dropping our attachments to the way things were, and to stop imposing some idealized past on the present. We are always where Haggai and his people were, only in different ways and circumstances. The challenge is to remain aware of and open to 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. It is tempting to cling to how we remember things 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 chaos or pain are always ebbing and flowing. What matters most is how our spiritual practice helps us stay awake and present to God's presence and promise, and to our own lives in God and what God calls and gifts us to do.

When the present feels so difficult, challenging, or barren, then it is time to return to the temple of God's presence, to our inward journey, as individuals, as mission groups, as a community. The "glory days" are always right now, if we continue to do the spiritual work of letting go of the past and waking up to the present where God is waiting to meet us, and is already working in our lives and our community.

The psalm for today says: *Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.*

Each new day we bless God, open our lives to God, listen for what God is saying to us and doing in and among us. This is all the work of our daily inward journey. It takes cultivating fresh eyes, fresh ears, fresh hearts and minds. Take courage, says God, I am with you. My spirit abides among you. Do not fear. Do not hold back.