

November 10, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Building a House for God—The Inward Journey

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.*

The events recorded in the book of the prophet Haggai took place sometime in October 520 BCE. As I have worked with this story, especially since becoming part of this community, I find that it speaks to the struggle of remaining aware of God, of our life in God, and what we feel God is calling us to do and to be in the present moment. Coming fully alive in this way—which to me is the meaning of rebirth or new birth spoken of in our scriptures-- means the ongoing work of letting go of the past, both its painful and good experiences. It also means letting go of our doomed attempts to control the future and remaining open to and being part of the future God is always bringing about. 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 alive in the present, where God meets us. The reading from Haggai can help us look at this.

Most of those deported have returned home from exile in Babylon. They face the overwhelming work of rebuilding lives and livelihoods. So far there is not much to show for their efforts. Crops are meager. Their income is barely subsistence(See 1:5-6). After the high spirits of liberation and homecoming, the people have sunk very low. The present feels bleak and hard to face. A feeble effort has been made to rebuild the temple, which had been destroyed when Jerusalem fell some fifty years earlier(587 BCE). Some rubble is cleared, the beginnings of a foundation laid. No one's heart is really in it. Along comes Haggai saying that the most urgent need is to get the temple done. What sense does that make? Shouldn't they first rebuild their houses and get businesses on a paying basis? Then they would have time for spiritual things! Nonetheless, the people get to work on the temple (1:12-15).

For Haggai the temple was the empowering sign of God's presence. Without the temple and what it represents, there was a spiritual vacuum at the center of life. For Haggai, the reason that the work on houses and farms and businesses had not proved very successful

was spiritual. The people were working without a sense of hope or purpose or meaning. Their lives had become all work and no spirit, no sense of connection with God's presence, purpose, and promise. When life becomes mostly outward journey, with 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.

I don't think this story is essentially about constructing church buildings, though religious communities need places to meet for anchoring and deepening their life in God. When the Church of the Covenant came into being, this house was chosen as the meeting place of the community for worship. The priority was not facilities for the community but outward service in the world. Still, there was recognition of the necessity to have a place, be it ever so humble, as a spiritual home, where the community would meet together in God's presence, for the community's corporate inward journey. As it turns out, our "sanctuary", our place of worship is not only in this house and this room, but also in the "sanctuary" of these forty acres of God's creation! Here we are able to deepen our love and service of God who is everywhere and in everything!

This story does point to the essential need for worship, for the individual and community 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 call for response. Yet the wisdom of the spiritual life as this community envisions it is that when Jesus calls us to live our lives as a journey of faith, it involves both the outward dimension AND the inward. The outward, both our ministries and our life together as a community and as mission groups, must be grounded in the inward, must flow out of prayer, contemplation, quietness of mind and heart, listening, reflection, sensing the things to which we are authentically called and for which God has gifted us.

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 restore that life-giving connection. Touching our relationship with God, with the sacredness of life and our own lives, 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 carry the effectiveness, healing, and power of God's love. Howard Thurman called this inward work "establishing an Island of Peace within our souls." I found this

insight echoed in The Dhammapada, a collection of the Buddha's teachings for the common person: "If you meditate earnestly, through spiritual disciplines you can make an island for yourself that no flood can overwhelm." (The Dhammapada, trans. By E. Easwaran) Also, in The Upanishads, the early scriptures of Hinduism: "In the city of Brahman is a secret dwelling, the lotus of the heart. Within this dwelling is a space, and within that space is the fulfillment of our desires. What is within that space should be longed for and realized." (The Upanishads, trans. By E. Easwaran) Until we begin opening to and cultivating this "Island of Peace within our souls," says Howard Thurman, we are not really alive, but lost, drifting, and ineffective. Our community simply calls this inward spiritual attention and work by another name--the inward journey.

Haggai now speaks to the few who, in their 70s now, might remember the old 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. Doesn't look like much, does it? We can imagine them standing around, shaking their heads about how shabby the present seems compared to the past. Haggai notices the nostalgia and the despondency. Discouraged by the challenges of living in the present, we fall into pining for the "glory days" of the past. Nothing in the present ever measures up. We find ourselves 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. Meanwhile, we are out of touch with the presence of God in the here and now, and are not responding to God's present activity that is opening doors to the future.

So, 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 with what God is about to do. This is the way God works, the way Reality works. Always in the present and toward a future that is in the making. Always something new being born, with God calling us to be part of it. God calls us to wake up. That is an excellent definition of the spiritual life--waking up. Waking up from our guilt. Waking up from our sense of failure. Waking up from our grief. Waking up from our nostalgia. Waking up from our fears. Waking up from our self-absorption. Living faithfully means keeping open to the new things God is always doing, in us and among us and around us. God is in the present, waiting patiently and lovingly for us to take courage, to wake up, to be part of what God is doing now.

I have come to believe that the hardest spiritual work 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. It means dropping our attachments to the way things were, and also to our ideas of how we think things should be. We are always where Haggai and his people were. 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 has come to symbolize for me--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 the past--past joys or past hurts--rather than embrace things that are and might be. But this is the very nature of life. Change. Impermanence. Flux. 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. It is the practice of faith, and what could faith mean but this courage to enter into what God is doing, within us and around us, now?

Especially 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 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.* This reminds me of the importance of our daily time for inward journey practice and work. Beginning each day with the quieting and opening of our lives to God, with a listening silence, renewing awareness of our lives in God before we begin the days' work and activities, so that our actions are truly in the service of God. The Common Grounds Cafe Mission Group has offered another opportunity for this. Each Monday through Friday morning at 7 the Chapel is open for a time of silence with ourselves and others. We have the Wednesday morning worship at 8, centered on listening to scripture readings and silence. These opportunities are in addition to what we might do each day on our own at home or wherever we are. 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, of building a house for God.