

The Latter Splendor

Unless you are a seminary graduate or ordained, I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you have never studied the Book of Haggai and that many of you have never even heard of it. There's no shame to this – it's a tiny two chapter book of preaching tucked away toward the end of that section of the Old Testament known as the "Minor Prophets" or "The Book of the Twelve." These prophets, by the way, are minor not because they lack spiritual insight or importance but simply because their writings are so much shorter than the extensive records left under the names of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

But questions of obscurity and brevity aside, there really is some good stuff in Haggai. Today's reading is the only one from this book in the Revised Common Lectionary but as I reread both chapters in preparation for this morning, I could see at least three more possible sermons coming from this post-exilic prophet. I found today's Scripture to be particularly appropriate for Good Shepherd Baptist Church as we consider our theme of "Rekindling." We are not contemplating the reconstruction of a destroyed building but we are looking for a renewal of our efforts to be a beacon of God's light in this place. We do not face the physical threats of enemies and drought that beset Haggai's congregation but we know what it is to face the spiritual hurdles of opposition, fatigue and dryness. Because of our relationships to Christ Jesus, the promises of God to the Children of Israel are applicable to us as well and it is good for us to hear Haggai's words of encouragement.

So, this morning, I want to spend a little time as an amateur lecturer in Old Testament History, bringing us all up to speed on the context of Haggai's message and then comparing Haggai's situation with that of another, more modern House of God that is near to my heart and then drawing parallels from both of those stories with our own here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. I hope that when I am done we will all feel the promise and reality of revival, of rekindling, of a security that the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former.

The brief Book of Haggai consists of a series of oracles or sermons given by Haggai to a group of Jews who had returned to Jerusalem following the destruction of that city in 587 BCE by the Babylonians. At that time, most of the population of Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon leaving only a remnant, mostly poor farmers, in the Promised Land. The Babylonians policy toward conquered people was similar to that of the Assyrians who had defeated the northern kingdom of Israel: take those who could be useful to the conquerors back to the homeland, disperse many of the rest and leave the pitiful few without leaders, resources or hope. But in 539 BCE, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians under Cyrus. The Persians believed that vassal states were far more likely to remain peaceably in the fold if treated with some dignity. The Persians often appointed governors for defeated territories from the native royalty, allowed worship of the native gods rather than imposing their own religion, and generally gave their territories a certain amount of independence, as long as they were faithful to the Persian Empire, provided soldiers when required and paid their taxes.

And so it was that within a year or so of becoming overlord of Judah, Cyrus issued an edict which is recorded in the Old Testament book of Ezra, authorizing and encouraging the Jews of Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Funds were gathered, the silver and gold furnishings of the Temple were returned to the Jews, and a party under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, the son of Judah's last king, set out. The task they found before them was

The Latter Splendor

daunting. Jerusalem and the Temple had been reduced to rubble and dust by the Babylonians and by the intervening fifty years. Sheshbazzar's group found opposition back in Babylon and Persia by those who were afraid they would rebel as well as opposition among those now inhabiting the area of Jerusalem. Just as in the modern state of Israel, property rights were an issue. Those who'd been left behind had spread out and taken over the better farms of their exiled neighbors. They were not eager to give these lands up after fifty years of working them. Others had moved into abandoned lands as well, particularly the group known as the Samaritans. These were the few remaining descendants of the ten northern tribes who had intermarried with the foreigners the Assyrians had imported to control the former Israel. Those returning from Babylon considered their cousins from the north to be impure mongrels, traitors to the lineage of Jacob and to Yahweh. The conflict quickly became violent and priority was given to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem over the Temple.

After a promising start, Sheshbazzar disappears from the record and in 520 BCE Persia's new emperor, Darius, sends another group to Jerusalem under the command of Sheshbazzar's nephew, Zerubbabel. It is unlikely that Darius was strictly motivated by concern for the future of Yahweh's Temple. He had emerged as the victor in a bloody struggle for the throne after Cyrus' son and heir, Cambyses, died under disputed circumstances. As James Newsome writes in his fine survey, The Hebrew Prophets, "the Jewish prince's primary commission was undoubtedly to secure Judah, a vital outpost on the road to Egypt (also now a Persian province) for the forces of Darius." But whatever the underlying cause, there was now a new and energetic young prince of the House of David in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, work on the Temple continued to lag. Haggai's first recorded utterance is to take the Jews of Jerusalem to task for focusing on their own comforts while neglecting the work needed on the Temple. It is their selfish attitude, he says, which has caused the drought that plagues the country. Apparently, this got their attention as it is not quite two months later that Haggai delivers what became our passage for this morning.

Part of what Haggai was addressing with the Jews of Jerusalem was a condition which is still very much among us today: nostalgia. Nostalgia has become quite an industry in our age with websites devoted to remembering how things were in earlier generations or in the early days of our own generation. You can find old music, old movies and old television shows to be purchased, heard or viewed in abundance on the internet and in stores. Nostalgia has become, for many of us, a pleasant diversion. But we would do well to remember that nostalgia was originally seen as a kind of melancholy, a sometimes debilitating mental illness. The word "nostalgia" was coined to describe a serious depression among soldiers fighting far from home; the word literally means "home pain." The term grew to cover another kind of "home pain;" that described in the famous phrase, "You can't go home again." Things never seem quite the same in reality as they do in our memories. As a result, we can become dissatisfied with the present and long to return to the "Golden Age" that likely exists only in our heads.

This was certainly part of the problem for the Jews of Jerusalem. Writing for the "Smith and Helwys Bible Commentaries," James D Nogalski of Baylor University says, "Given that the average life expectancy was far less than fifty and that less than ten percent of the population lived to be more than seventy, few would have been alive who could recall the first temple (destroyed 67 years earlier), and fewer still who could have recalled it with any accurate detail." Yes, this new

The Latter Splendor

temple was smaller, probably made primarily from the broken and fire scorched stones that had not been pilfered by local farmers. But the real problem was that it could not match the golden glow of their memories. As Timothy Simpson writes in his commentary on this passage, “It is a commonplace to note that as we age, nothing in our later years is ever as beautiful, vibrant, moving, sensual (pick your adjective) as it was when we experienced it in our youth.” With the great respect given to them due to their longevity, the elders who disparaged the new work could easily have derailed the project yet again.

With a word from the Lord, Haggai addresses this problem straight on. “...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 you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” Haggai is reminding them that although the Temple they remember was beautiful, that was never the main point. The splendor of the old Temple came from within its core, the Holy of Holies, where the presence of God dwelt. It was the glory of the Lord that gave the Temple its true beauty and in Haggai’s message the people are reminded that God has promised to be with them still. As they have faith in God to be with them, they will again begin to see God’s Spirit shining even in the broken and marred stones.

And, indeed, this was the case. We know now that this Temple which was such a disappointment to some who first saw it became the inspiration and spiritual center for the Jewish people for another 600 years, outlasting that first Temple built by Solomon. As renovated by Herod, the Temple in Jerusalem was a point of admiration and awe by the followers of Jesus. The building was later remembered as being spectacular but it was the worship of God within that made it beloved. Because of the diaspora, the spreading of Jews around the then-known world, tithes and gifts came to that Temple from places the worshippers in the First Temple could not have imagined. The treasures of all the nations really did come to the Temple Zerubbabel and his group rebuilt. And it was in this Temple that the works of the prophets and the books of Moses and nearly all of what we know as the Old Testament were preserved and studied and debated. It was in this Temple that the Messiah was dedicated to God, where Anna and Simeon praised God for the child, where he returned with Mary and Joseph for the Passover, where he taught with his disciples. Truly, the latter splendor of that house was greater than the former.

As I thought of the history of the Temple that Zerubbabel rebuilt for Yahweh this week, I thought of another ancient House of God, less well-known but still celebrated, where I have worshipped and worked, the influence of which is felt here at Good Shepherd Baptist and in churches around the world. In the Year of Our Lord 563, an Irish monk named Columba fled his homeland and his Benedictine monastery after a conflict over a manuscript had escalated into violence. He and his twelve companions landed on the island of Iona, just over the horizon from Ireland. There they established a new monastery, dedicated to peace and to learning. It became an influential center for the spread of Christianity among the Picts and Scots. Kings were crowned, and also buried, on Iona. The Book of Kells, a famous illuminated manuscript, is believed to have been produced by the monks of Iona in the years leading up to 800.

Like the Temple in Jerusalem, the Abbey of Iona suffered from the predations of armed enemies. Vikings raided and slaughtered the welcoming monks in 806 and again in 825, when they burned the abbey. It was rebuilt and then destroyed again, rebuilt yet again in 1203. Finally, it was abandoned when the Reformation came to Scotland and both Anglicans and Presbyterians suppressed the monasteries.

The Latter Splendor

The picture of the ruined abbey is on the front of your bulletin, from a shot taken in the 1890s. The church of the abbey was restored beginning in 1903 and completed in 1905. Perhaps more significantly, a complete restoration of the abbey was begun in 1938 under the leadership of Rev. George MacLeod. MacLeod was then a young Presbyterian minister assigned to a slum parish in Glasgow. He formed the Iona Community with the then-radical mission of seeking “new ways to touch the hearts of all.” MacLeod brought together unemployed Glasgow craftsmen and trainee ministers to work on rebuilding the abbey cloister, thus helping prepare young ministers for their work in deprived inner city areas and giving work and hope to the craftsmen. Restoration of the monastery buildings was finally completed in 1965.

The Iona Community continues today to focus on youth; justice, peace and the environment; poverty and social exclusion; overcoming racism; ecumenical and inter-faith relations. People of all denominations and all faiths have come to live and work for a week or more at the Abbey and at the nearby MacLeod Centre. There is worship three times a day in the Abbey Church, in a style that is both quite modern and quite ancient, reflecting the Benedictine beginnings of the abbey. The music produced by the Iona Community is now in hymnals of many denominations (it’s in our Chalice Hymnal, which was produced by the Disciples of Christ) and aspects of the Iona style of worship have been adopted by churches around the world. Our own prayer after the reading of Scripture is taken from the Iona liturgy. No kings have been crowned nor buried there for centuries; the Book of Kells found a safer home in Ireland during the days of the Viking raids. Nevertheless, Iona continues to be a place of profound blessing for many and the scattered Community based there continues the work of ministry in God’s name around the world. As the Iona songs are sung and liturgies used, it is easy to affirm that the latter glory of that place has become greater than the former.

So what does all this have to do with Good Shepherd Baptist Church? We sit this morning in a perfectly sound little building, needing perhaps some roof work but we have insurance for that, or maybe some new carpeting and a touch-up to the paint here and there but the funds for something like that are not far beyond our reach. But just as the future for the Jews of Jerusalem or the Benedictines of Iona lay beyond the fabric of their respective buildings, so is the future for this church a bright future that reaches out and beyond these walls. Our place in the eyes of our Loving Creator is not dependent upon the manufactured beauty of the place where we meet but upon the way in which we answer the call to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. The glory of this congregation in the eyes of our neighbors is not about how tall and shiny the cross on our steeple is or how many we see each week in Sunday School or in worship. It is about how we serve the community around us; particularly those Jesus called “the least of these.”

Haggai says that God promised the Jews of Jerusalem that the treasure of all nations would come to them. The late Rev. Douglas Jones, an Anglican professor of Old Testament, wrote that this vision was ultimately fulfilled in the universal scope of the “One, Holy and Apostolic Church.” For him, this was part of the ecumenical vision, that all Christian traditions and communions are necessary to the “latter glory” of the Church. And, as he reminded his European and American readers, “nor is it possible without the contribution of Africa, Asia and the East.” We have experienced the blessing of cooperating with Asian Christians right here in our building as well as within our Evergreen Association. We have also been blessed by the presence in our congregation of Christians from Africa as well as with the dear friendships we have experienced with our African-American brothers and sisters in Evergreen. God has put us in a unique place and time, with Asian and African and Hispanic immigrants arriving in our city on a daily basis and international students moving in and out of Edmonds Community College annually. I continue to believe to my soul that the future for our

The Latter Splendor

ministry in this place is inextricably bound up with these newcomers to America and, for those who have come to stay, with their children and grandchildren.

Just as for the company of Zerubbabel, God promises Good Shepherd Baptist Church the glory that comes from the presence of God. In this, we will find what the NRSV rather dubiously translates as “prosperity.” The original Hebrew is a word well-known to us: shalom. The presence of God brings us a security and well-being that goes beyond the absence of war, beyond the concept of wealth as the world understands it. Timothy Simpson writes, “It was never about our physical plant. It was never about our per capita giving. It was never about the number of people on the rolls. It was never about the size of the denomination. It was never about the influence of our religion on the culture or whether the White House took the calls of our leaders. It was always about the presence of God in our midst, and the sooner that (we) realize this ourselves, the sooner we can begin to help others live it, too... The truth is that none of the conventional methods and means in which we have so long invested can help us. If we are to be prosperous, it will be because of the presence. If we are to be safe and secure, it will be because of the presence. If we are to have a future, it will be because of the presence.”

As we ask God to rekindle the fire in our hearts, to revive us again and to rebuild the place of God’s presence in our lives, we do know that we have, in the words of another of God’s prophets, “a future and a hope.” But we are called to remember not only that God’s call has never really been about our physical plant or any of those other “signs of success” but about the impact that we have on others with the love that God has given us and asked us to share. What we are called to build is not an edifice with God’s name painted on the outside but a community, a people, in whom God dwells. We can do this because we rely not on our own power but upon the power of God, upon the Spirit of Christ which dwells within us. God has promised us this power, this blessing, this shalom. And, thanks be to God, we know that God’s word is faithful and true. Amen.