

The Best is Yet to Come

It can be pretty easy sometimes to feel discouraged, even when we have such solid reminders of God's watchful care for us. I can tell you that the last couple of weeks have held plenty of discouragement for me as well as moments of real blessing. It can be discouraging to face blindly hostile opposition when one is doing the best one can for the most people possible. It can be discouraging to think one has agreement with others on a particular way to proceed, only to find that those others have quickly forgotten or simply don't care about your agreements. Friday, many of our friends faced the discouragement of the passing of a long-time friend just as they were traveling to say final goodbyes to another. We may be discouraged by little failures in our personal lives, silly quarrels with those we love, or by little failures in our professional lives, having a colleague walk away from joint responsibilities at crunch time. It can be easy to feel discouraged.

It can be easy to feel discouraged corporately, too. One of the dangers of reviewing our congregation's history, as we're doing now during the Sunday School hour, is that folks may turn too wistful an eye upon the past. Some things that we recall from the 60s, 70s, 80s, and so forth may look brighter than their counterparts in the middle of the Twenty-Teens. "Wow, they had two Sunday services then?" "They had how many people in Sunday School?" "Man, those ideas were really cutting edge!" "We had so much fun and energy back then." You know what I mean.

But the antidote to discouragement is hope and faith that better times are coming. We might even be bold enough to say, "The Best is Yet to Come." That's the title of a song written by Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh in 1959, just about the time this church was beginning to be planned. They wrote it for Tony Bennett, who recorded it in 1962, but Frank Sinatra's recording in '64 became the standard and, in fact, Sinatra's tombstone is inscribed "The best is yet to come." My favorite rendition is the one by James Darren, who recorded it in his character of "Vic Fontaine" for Star Trek: Deep Space Nine. But I digress...

"The Best is Yet to Come" could certainly be the heading on our passage from the Old Testament this morning. Haggai is a pretty obscure little book in our Bible but there's some powerful preaching in it. In my days as an actor/director/administrator at Houston's A.D. Players, our touring companies often performed one of our founder's plays called "Memo" – a review of some significant passages in Scripture framed as a family reunion. The opening word of the Lord in Haggai was presented as a remembered sermon from a long-ago preacher in the family and it was pretty dramatic stuff. But I've always found that I preferred the present passage.

Some reminders about the setting and context of Haggai are probably in order. The little book 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

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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 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 rather than 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. Most nights, before we call it a day, Connie and I watch reruns of "The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson."

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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 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.

That phrase from our passage in Haggai is reproduced on the cover of your bulletin. I did not take this particular picture although I took one very much like it. The location of that plaque is

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on one of the remaining walls of the old Cathedral of St. Michael in Coventry, England. Do you remember its story? Built in the late 14th and early 15th centuries as the largest parish church in England, the beautiful Gothic edifice was granted cathedral status in 1918. Just 22 years later, the cathedral was nearly destroyed by the German incendiary bombardment of Coventry, a leading industrial center, on November 14, 1940. Only the outer walls, the tower and spire, and the tomb of the first Bishop of Coventry survived. According to the cathedral's website: "The decision to rebuild the cathedral was taken the morning after its destruction. Rebuilding would not be an act of defiance, but rather a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world. It was the vision of the Provost at the time, Dick Howard, which led the people of Coventry away from feelings of bitterness and hatred."

As plans progressed to rebuild the cathedral, the decision was made to retain the ruins of the Gothic structure as a living part of the cathedral, still hallowed ground, a place of prayer especially for reconciliation. As one enters the cathedral, one's eye is still drawn to the east end, where the high altar would have originally been. Now the area features a rough wooden cross, a replica of one erected on the day after the fire in 1940. The cathedral's stonemason, Jock Forbes, had found that two charred roof beams had fallen together to form a cross, lashed them together and set them up at the site of the altar. Provost Howard had the words "Father Forgive," an echo of Christ's words from the cross, engraved in the wall behind the cross. This place is now the daily site of prayers for reconciliation and the home for much beautiful art. The replacement cathedral, a spectacular soaring construct of steel and glass, contains yet more breathtaking art. The new Cathedral of St. Michael has also become the home for the International Centre for Reconciliation and the International Network of Communities of the Cross of Nails. These groups work locally in reconciling churches and community groups but also internationally (predominantly in the Middle East and central Africa) working with terrorists and dictators as well as local churches, tribes and gangs. Internationally, 160 Cross of Nails Centers share a common commitment to work and pray for peace, justice and reconciliation. In this work, the glory of the new cathedral has clearly 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, one, in fact, that we've dramatically improved in the last year with new storage buildings and emergency lighting, a new sidewalk and dumpster corral, and even the completion of the forty-year delayed men's restroom project. But just as the future for the Jews of Jerusalem or the Church of England in Coventry 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

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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, Asia, South America, and Europe as well as by the dear friendships we have experienced with our diverse brothers and sisters in Evergreen. God has put us in a unique place and time, with Asian and African and Hispanic and Eastern European 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 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 rely on God’s providential care for us, as we ask God to lead us into the undiscovered country of the future, 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.