

## CELEBRATING GENEROSITY

Celebrating God's Presence

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Haggai 1:15b – 2:9

<sup>15</sup>*On the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. In the second year of King Darius,<sup>1</sup> in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, <sup>3</sup>Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? <sup>4</sup>Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>5</sup>according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. <sup>6</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; <sup>7</sup>and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>8</sup>The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>9</sup>The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.*

Late last month, in a lecture at 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Peter Gomes, the Pastor of Memorial Church in Boston, described his role as a preacher and the role of Christians in general to be twofold. On one hand he said we are to be curators of the past. Just as a curator of a museum is to care for and preserve the treasures of the museum, Gomes argues that we as Christians are to preserve and care for the treasures of the Christian tradition. On the other hand Gomes argued that we are to be vision casters for the future – looking forward to see the ways in which God can and will be at work for revitalization and renewal in our individual lives and in our faith community.

Today we are in the midst of our Stewardship Campaign – Celebrating Generosity. Last week we began by celebrating commitment, the commitments that God makes to us that allow us to make commitments to God and to others. This week we turn now to Celebrate God's Presence. And as we celebrate God's presence this morning I

want us to begin by taking a look back into a very important part of the history of our faith.

For our ancient Israelite ancestors, the temple played a vitally important role to the life of faith. In ancient Israel the temple was the center of life, it was the place where people could go to come into the presence of God. The community gathered at the temple on high holy days and they went to the temple to take sacrifices to God throughout the course of the year. The temple was life, it was the central place of the community. And in approximately the year 586 BC the temple and much of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Israelites were displaced from their homeland.

Needless to say, the destruction of the first temple marked the beginning of a rough time for the Israelites. This time period is one commonly referred to as the Babylonian Exile because many of the Israelites were living in exile, removed from their homeland. After the destruction of the temple many of the upper-class Jews, the leaders of the community, were taken into Babylonian captivity. Many of the rest of the Jews fled into Egypt and surrounding areas, the community was scattered, splintered, fractured. A community that had once gathered together and received their identity from the temple in Jerusalem, was now alienated and isolated from one another, and in the minds of many, from God who had been present in the temple.

It was during this time that people began to stray from God's commandments and God's hopes for God's people. During this time period much of the Hebrew Bible was written, especially the Major Prophets many of whom were speaking to these communities in exile. About the year 538 BC, decades after the destruction of the temple, King Cyrus of Persia allowed the exiled Israelites to return to Jerusalem, but by

that time many of them had forgotten the way in which they had lived in the days before the temple was destroyed and they were sent away.

This setting, in the midst of a lost and confused community is where the Prophet Haggai received his call from God to speak to God's people. Not much is known about Haggai, but as is the case with prophets, Haggai's message is one that he felt God calling him to deliver to God's people. The particular piece of Haggai's message that we are looking at today is the third installment if you will of God's word for the people of Israel.

Before we look at the text from Haggai itself, it's important to understand a bit of the context in which Haggai was speaking. Haggai was speaking these words to the people of Israel on the seventh day of the great eight-day autumn festival, the Feast of Booths – a day celebrating the harvest and God's sustaining care. This is significant because during this festival Israelites are celebrating when Solomon brought the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple and when the Temple was dedicated. The Israelites are in the midst of a celebration, remembering the building and dedication of the temple, when Haggai comes to the people and speaks words reminding them of and forcing them to face the reality of the temple's destruction and the fact that it no longer exists.

Hear these words from Haggai 1:15b – 2:9... <sup>15</sup>*On the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. In the second year of King Darius, <sup>1</sup>in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, <sup>3</sup>Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? <sup>4</sup>Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, <sup>5</sup>according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. <sup>6</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; <sup>7</sup>and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>8</sup>The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>9</sup>The*

*latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.*

Haggai was greatly concerned about the people rebuilding the temple as a way of remembering and pleasing God. As a way of reconnecting people to the sense of community and connection and direction that they had before the Temple was destroyed. The people had become disconnected from God and from one another and Haggai was calling them to rely on God's strength for renewal – so that the temple might be rebuilt. Haggai says it clearly, "Take courage, all you people of the land, 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." And also, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts." God is calling the people to rebuild the temple and promising them that as they do so, God will be with them. Take courage, work, I am with you, my spirit abides among you, do not fear – this is the good news of God; God who has been, is, and will be present with God's people.

There are two kinds of church signs that I have come to notice over the last several years. There are signs like ours out front that says something to the effect of "Ridge United Methodist Church" and then has worship times on it and is updated with our coming events. Then there are also church signs that are slightly different and say something like "Ridge United Methodist Church meets here." Do you catch the difference? What are these signs saying? That's right, they're saying that the church is not the physical building, but rather is the community of believers that gathers and worships together. You see, we love our buildings, but the reality is, as Christians today,

we don't have a centralized sacred place to the same extent as the ancient Israelites and the temple.

Now, why do I talk about church signs and the difference between the church as a building and the church as a community of people? Good question! In the text we're looking at today, Haggai emphasizes the importance of rebuilding the temple – we are not overly concerned today with having a temple. While it might be tempting then to discount this text as having nothing to say to us today, the opposite is quite the case. Even though we might not be primarily concerned about rebuilding the temple, we are, or at least all should be, concerned about the work of God in the world. We should still be looking for those places and those things that God is seeking to rebuild in our lives and in our communities. But what is the temple for us today? What are these things that we are waiting upon God to rebuild in our lives, in our relationships and in our communities?

In the world today there are many people who desperately want God to come and to rebuild parts of themselves. Over the last couple of decades we have seen an increase in depression cases amongst children, youth, men, women and the elderly. This serious disease leaves many yearning for God to come and to rebuild, but the good news is that God loves us unconditionally and that God has been, God is, and God will be present with persons struggling with depression.

Many people ranging from young pre-adolescent boys and girls to men and women later in life struggle with self image and feel as if they're not thin enough, pretty enough, smart enough, and generally good enough. Issues of self worth leave many yearning for God to come and rebuild, but the good news is that God has created us all in

God's image and that God has been, God is, and God will be present with persons struggling with self worth.

We live in a world where relationships are broken and splintered and where much hurt and tension exists between friends, between neighbors, between parents and children, between siblings, and between partners. In the midst of the brokenness, people yearn to live in peace and harmony with one another and desire for God to rebuild their relationships, but the good news is that God calls us to be in community and works for reconciliation and restoration – that God has been, God is, and God will be working to help mend strained and broken relationships.

And while we yearn for God to rebuild our individual selves as well as the relationships in which we live, we also yearn for God to restore our communities. We live out this yearning through our desire to serve meals at the State Street Center, to open our doors to Middle School Students through our Open Gym ministry, and to travel around the country and world on mission trips. When we look around the world we can see so much hurt and desperation in our communities, but the good news is that God calls us to live in community with one another and that God has been, God is, and God will be calling people to live lives of justice and peace.

One of my favorite quotations regarding faith is attributed to St. Augustine who said that we are supposed to work like it's all up to us, and pray like it's all up to God. We know that God has been, is, and will be at work for restoration and renewal, but that doesn't mean that we can simply sit back and twiddle our thumbs, waiting for the time that God will make all things new. As Christians we are called to play an important role

in the recreation of the world. And it is because of the goodness of God in the past, that we can be assured of God's presence pulling us into the future.

It is said that when he was on his deathbed, shortly before he breathed his last breath, John Wesley said, "Best of all, God is with us." This is truly the best news, that in the midst of all of the stuff of life, God is with us. And it is this assurance, of God's presence that has been, is, and will be with us, that can give us confidence of the future to come.

During a time of question and answer following Gomes' lecture a couple of weeks ago he challenged those present with the following thought. "It is because I have confidence in the God of history that I can have confidence in the God of the future." Gomes then asked, "What effort does it take to believe in the past?" "Faith," he argued, is about believing in the future.

Faith is about believing in the future – the future that God will bring for us as individuals, as a congregation, and as a community. We are called to have faith for the future because we have seen the goodness of God at work in the past.