

22 Pentecost  
Christ and Grace  
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Haggai 1:15b-2:9  
November 10, 2019

In our first reading from Haggai, we hear of the return of the people of Israel from Babylonian exile. Jerusalem was in ruins, the temple had been destroyed, and it looked hopeless. I imagine that right now there are people in California who understand this sense of hopelessness as they return to their homes after being evacuated due to the fires, or much like those returning home after a hurricane or tornado.

Perhaps we can understand this sense of hopelessness if we've ever had to return to our own suddenly changed life after an unexpected event – like life after a spouse has been unfaithful, life after discovering a child on drugs, life after an unwanted diagnosis – and if we have not yet experienced this sort of thing, surely we know of someone else who has.

When we must return to a life that is changed, not ended, where do we find strength and hope? What is our hope as Christians? Our catechism in the Book of Common Prayer has an entire section beginning on page 861 entitled “The Christian Hope” and it reads, in part, like this: The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world. It goes on to say that Christ will come, not in weakness but in power, and will make all things new; that God will raise us from death in the fullness of our being, that we may live with Christ in the communion of saints; those whom we love and those whom we hurt will be with us there. In Christ we will be united with all in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other. This is what the resurrection of Christ accomplishes for us. It gives us hope.

We all hope for something. For a prodigal child to return home, for healing from disease, for enough money to pay the bills, for those we love to find happiness and meaning in life, for an end to violence or poverty, or hunger. We all have something we hope for, something that we whisper to God in our prayers.

In Haggai, we hear of the dashed hopes of the people of Israel, seeing the ruins of Jerusalem as they return from exile. Their temple is destroyed, their city is a disaster, nothing remains. The faithful remnant, who still remember life in its former glory have no hope that they can possibly rebuild their city, and more importantly, their place of worship.

But God speaks to them in their hopelessness. Three times God tells them to take courage, because just as promised, God’s spirit abides among them. God promises to shake things up, and we know that sometimes it’s not comfortable when God is shaking things up! Notice that there is not an exact time given – God says it will be “in a little while”.

We too have questions and fears when life gets hard and challenges our hope. We become mired in the details of the present mess, and sometimes forget where our hope lies. We try to rationalize everything, wanting to know when and how and why. It’s difficult for us to imagine or comprehend how life will be redeemed when it appears so chaotic; we can only think in

earthly, human ways. So we begin to panic, we become anxious in the midst of chaos, and we may lose hope as did the returning exiles.

In the concerns and fears that Haggai addresses, we can hear the voices of the faithful from many different times and places as we react to our own anxieties with memories of better days. A deteriorating building with recurring costly repairs, a congregation and community that look very different than in years past, and a world that is changing faster than many can comprehend can cause us to look back to times that seem to have been better or easier or more glorious. Haggai's prophecy calls us to look backward, not with wistfulness for what is gone but with hope that God who has been faithful in the past will just as faithfully create a new future.<sup>1</sup>

Haggai, speaking for God, challenged both those who longed for the past and those who hoped for the future, reminding all of them that God was still with them, and that the journey was not over. "...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."

Pastor and author Stan Duncan notes that, "We are living in a Haggai era. We are a people with widely (and wildly) varying expectations of what a church is supposed to do and be, [without] nearly enough resources to fulfill half of them. But at the end of the day, in spite of all [our] desires that it be different, church and ministry and the realm of God on earth is not about budgets and buildings and memberships and endowments. It was and is and always will be about creating a community (both locally and globally) in which people feel the presence of God in their midst, lifting, enabling, empowering, and redeeming their lives and the lives of others. If we can do that, then God's "House" will be rebuilt and revived and revised, and it will be a beacon to outsiders to those who do not yet know Jesus. If we are unable to do that, then we might as well join those who moved to Samaria and started another religion."<sup>2</sup>

God's story has always been the story of a people trying to rebuild their lives and determine where God is in the midst of it. The story in Haggai is a chronicle of two generations, one with memories of a glorious past and one with some hopes for a faithful future. Not so different than our story today, it tells the good news about the God of hope who is the same yesterday, today, and forever; who is always doing a new thing.

Perhaps this is an invitation from the Prophet Haggai for us to stop clinging to what is dead, to what is passing away; an invitation to be willing to risk evolution, metanoia, growth, and change. What new and living thing does God want to do among us that we're too afraid to let God do?<sup>3</sup> Will we live as people of hope? Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin J. Wendland [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4275](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4275)

<sup>2</sup> Stan G. Duncan, "How to Build a Temple" <http://homebynow.blogspot.com/2016/11/how-to-build-temple.html>

<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2440>