

## Former and Future Glories

Preached FCCW, November 10, 2019

Haggai 2:1-9

In 1929, St. Mary's Catholic church in Randolph MA embarked upon an ambitious building project. The wood frame church was torn down to its foundation in order to make room for a larger, granite structure. Something else happened in 1929 though. The stock market crashed. Then came the Great Depression. The money to rebuild the church evaporated. People were too preoccupied with trying to get by themselves, to have the resources or energy to continue the construction. So, they basically just put a roof over the foundation and met in the basement.

For the next sixty years, St. Mary's remained an odd looking, basement-only church. Until, in 1989 a beautiful sanctuary was finally completed on that foundation laid so many years before. The new sanctuary, replete with soaring stained-glass windows and high airy ceilings was dedicated at a special Mass presided over by a Cardinal. And parishioners-some of them old enough to remember the original wood frame church, and who had lived through the years of worshipping in a covered basement-wept for joy that the glorious old vision had been fulfilled, at last.

A similar scenario played out in the time of a prophet whose name is not exactly a household word. Haggai. The Book of Haggai is only two chapters long and Haggai's career as a prophet is dated at just three months. Despite Haggai's relative obscurity, the message he was commissioned by God to deliver is universal in its scope and timeless in its significance. To understand why, requires some historical context.

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they destroyed the magnificent Temple that had been built by King Solomon and took most of the prominent Judeans back to Babylon as exiles. A generation or so later, the Jewish exiles were allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem, and their Temple. That work was begun with a surplus of optimism and energy. People worked in shifts, day and night, and at great personal sacrifice. Soon though, life began to get in the way of their mission. They had all they could do to care for their own homes and families, let alone devote time and energy for God's house. Those who still remembered the splendor of Solomon's Temple despaired of ever matching that greatness with the dwindling materials, manpower and motivation now at their disposal. And so, progress on the Temple gradually ground to a halt with only the foundation erected. And that's how it remained for decades.

Faith communities of all kinds encounter daunting challenges and demoralizing setbacks. When we define ourselves by those losses, reconstructing the "good old days" can feel like a pursuit that is doomed to failure before it is begun. Our focus is so set on the former glories of the past, that we fail to perceive the possibility of future glories that lie before us.

It is then that Haggai's message speaks directly to us. *"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? Yet now take courage, 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. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts."*

Haggai's message from the Lord turns their nostalgia for a glorious past they thought was gone forever, into a hope for a prosperous future whose glory would surpass anything they had ever seen before. God *does* invite them to look back; not to discourage them about how far they have fallen but to remind them of how far God had brought them since the days when they were slaves in Egypt. And to promise them that God's Spirit abided with them now as it did then. Even though the partially restored Temple was just a pale shadow of its former glory.

Just as God's Spirit abided with the good people of St. Mary's as they worshipped in an inglorious covered basement. Just as God's Spirit abides with *us*, as *we* look back nostalgically to a past when this church building was expanded to accommodate swelling membership rolls and burgeoning ministries. And as we now shake our heads at how things ain't what they used to be and wonder if those glory days are a relic of the past instead of a vision for our future.

Haggai's message was never about God needing the people to restore the Temple because God needed a roof over His head. It was about the *people* needing God to restore *their purpose* as God's people.

What if the greatest former glory of this faith community had less to do with the size of the membership rolls, and everything to do with the presence of God that stirred the hearts of people to commit themselves to the ministry of the church, despite the personal sacrifices that entailed? When our calls for volunteers to positions of service are made in apologetic tones out of respect for the busyness of people's lives maybe we aren't really doing anyone any favors. The common thread of the people who have spoken these last few Sundays about their personal experiences of serving on committees hasn't been on what sacrifices they had to make, but on what they received.

Remember those old recruitment posters with Uncle Sam pointing and saying, "I Want You"? Well, Haggai's call to serve amounts to God's recruitment message that God needs each and every one of us, if we are to accomplish the mission set before us.

When we despair at the challenges that confront us; challenges that are unique to *our time*; when our responsibilities and the demands placed on us eat away at our good intentions about supporting the mission and ministry of this House of God, may *we* take courage in the assurance that God abides with *us*. But courage alone will not bring us closer to the future glory toward which God is calling us, if that courage is not converted into an active willingness to commit ourselves to the work that needs to be done.

The essence of Haggai's message comes down to this one sentence. *"Take courage, all you people of the land; WORK, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts."* Notice how the courage that comes with faith that God dwells among us serves as the motivation to do the work that needs doing?

Next Sunday will be our annual presentation of the budget and our election for the offices and committees upon which the ministry of this church relies. Many positions remain unfilled and many costs of ministry remain unmet. Instead of making our needs known apologetically and responding to those needs reluctantly, let us ask boldly and respond courageously.

What is the work that God is calling *you* to do, to make the future glories of this church a reality?

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