

Fill This House with Splendor
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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
November 10, 2019
Haggai 1:15b – 2:9:1-9

As we remember Veterans Day, and the armistice of November 11, 1918, let us observe a moment of silence. Let us pray: We remember, O God, all who serve, past and present. We remember all who gave the last and final measure. We ask for the healing of those who have been wounded in body and soul, wounds visible and invisible. May those who live with injured bodies and traumatized spirits receive your solace and healing. Bring peace to those places where warfare rages. Give us the vision to see a world in which all grow weary with war and fighting, and turn their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. These things we ask in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

I have been thinking of my balcony people this week; perhaps you have been as well. And because of that, I have been thinking about buildings, balconies and otherwise. I continue to explore this building, its nooks and crannies.

I must admit a fascination about all of this, with no particular building capacity whatsoever. I used to watch “This Old House” regularly, every Saturday morning, long before the proliferation of home improvement shows and YouTube videos. Do you remember that show – Norm and Tommy and Richard and the boys refurbishing an old house with great skill and artistry? No more would I perform open heart surgery after watching “Grey’s Anatomy” than I would do what they did just by watching the show, but I loved it and appreciated it.

Whenever I have worked on Habitat for Humanity projects, I am often tasked with the lowest-skilled job of the jobs. My father taught me how to use two tools – duct tape and a staple gun. No matter. I love it, and appreciate it. Homes, museums, and especially church buildings, of all kinds. In fact, I had to strike an agreement with Bonny and the kids as we travelled this summer – I could visit as many churches as I wanted, but they would, at most, visit two, one per week. Fair enough, I said.

So I read with that level of interest, along with a more general sense of gratitude, our lectionary passage from the book of the prophet Haggai this morning. Haggai may be unfamiliar to us, showing up only every so often in the lectionary, but the narrative is very familiar, and the vision a timeless one.

We might remember from our Sunday school days the Babylonian exile. We might remember a name like Cyrus of Persia, and remember that he conquered Babylon and published a decree that allowed the captive Jews to return to Palestine. He also encouraged them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Many church thinkers have suggested that we who live in the Presbyterian Church, and other mainline churches, are also experiencing a kind of exile. Much of the exile talk has been precipitated by significant membership decline in the denomination over the past few decades, or our reduced role in matters of culture. And now we want to come back.

Whenever that exile image is raised, I always want to know "exiled *from* what?" And, "come back *to* what?" If the sense is that we are exiled from an old model of success and that we simply want to re-capture the former glory days, I'm not much interested in the discussion.

But if the conversation leads us to consider that we might be exiled from a sense of vibrancy and urgency and faithfulness, and we seek to recover something of the challenge and excitement of the deepest roots of our faith, then let's go.

Israel was coming back, returning in a physical sense. But location is one slim piece of a greater whole. A new temple was completed in 515 BC, and one of its most vocal, and faithful, cheerleaders was Haggai. Haggai "exhorted Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest...to assume official leadership in the reconstruction." A capital campaign on steroids. But it was...more than that. Haggai encouraged the people to recover their true faith, with the temple as a powerful symbol of what rebuilt faith could look like.

Buildings are important, but only so far as they promote genuine faith within the walls and joyful and compassionate service beyond the walls. Another way to say it two Sundays before Stewardship Sunday is this: just as the church is about the building and so much more, so is stewardship about money and so much more. Another way to say it is that stewardship Sunday is profoundly about money, but in a profoundly different way.

The issues are spiritual and communal. The issue is hope. Haggai says that the time is now. He then paints a wonderful image, speaking in the voice of God. "I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations will

come, and I will *fill this house with splendor*...and the latter splendor of this house will be greater than the former..."

It is a kind of a divine shakedown Haggai suggests. The created world and all those who live in it feel God's presence. And what falls out in the shaking is a richness of treasures that will surpass anything ever seen.

Steed Davidson writes that "(Haggai's voice) helps the community understand the meaning of its major symbol. Haggai rallies the community for the task of restoration of the temple precisely because the temple serves a critical function in the community. Haggai calls the people," Davidson says, "to acknowledge the centrality of the temple given their past and their future."

John Holbert writes that "Yes, Haggai wanted a rebuilt temple, but clearly not for its own sake. The bricks and mortar of any building have no meaning apart from the conviction that God has brought us out of the bondage of Egypt and remains with us still. No matter what this building looks like, God is here, and God is working."

Because I think so much about church buildings, and spend so much time in them, I understand that they can become ends to their own means, a kind of slippery slope. I believe that while Haggai's concern with the physicality of the temple was appropriate, and inspired by God, that there is more.

Some of you know the story of this congregation, a story I am learning. Its first location on Rex and Germantown Avenues, a beautiful building now occupied by a Seventh-Day Adventist congregation. Some of you know the story of an offshoot congregation, called Trinity Church, who built a new building at Gravers Lane and Germantown Avenue, no longer there. Some more than 30 years later, these two congregations united, and worshipped at the original building. Plans for a new building were interrupted first by the Great Depression, then by the Second World War. In 1950, on donated land, this space was dedicated, built from the stone that was quarried in the excavation process – Chestnut Hill Blue Stone, I believe it is called.

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And we do, or we aspire do so do. The Hebrew translated "splendor" can mean glory, or majesty. But we get the point.

And yet. Such splendor then could not have been simply the beauty and majesty of the temple, just as such splendor now can't simply be about the beauty and majesty of this edifice, as lovely as it is, as well-cared for as it is. Splendor, for us, can't mean simply that, or this building becomes a museum, a preservation hall.

- Splendor is the worship that happens in this place, the engagement with God’s word and the renewal, week after week, of God’s claim on our lives, and God’s call to send us out in service.
- Splendor is the nurture that happens with our children and young people and adults, lifelong learners.
- Splendor is the many forms of music and art that happen here – captured today by the extraordinary Souls Shot exhibit or the presence of our friends from the Pennsylvania Girlchoir.
- Splendor is the use of this building every day of the week – our thriving preschool, our Center on the Hill, the seemingly dozens of arts and learning and community groups that fill every inch of the place.

And then, because you hear me talk about the permeability of these walls, splendor must include the mission that is launched *from* this place. It takes on many forms – this week it’s Thanksgiving bags or Habitat for Humanity or PIHN.

Stan Duncan writes 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 and with not nearly enough resources to fulfill half of them. But at the end of the day, 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.”

One of my favorite movies, you might not be surprised to learn, is “Field of Dreams.” We actually visited the field, in Dyersville, Iowa. And yes, I wondered if I was in heaven.

“If you build it, they will come,” the voice said to Ray. In the church, we used to think that if you simply build a building, with decent parking, people will come. That was the culture, and that was the time. But the point of that field of dreams was never the field itself. It was the game that was played on it, and the players. The splendor.

So I will continue to love church buildings, and we will continue to support, and care for, and deeply appreciate, this one, its grace and beauty

But even more so, the game itself, the faith, the relationships, the community, the splendor of worship and learning and service, needed in this moment every bit as much as 2600 years ago, when an obscure prophet reminded us of God’s vision, and with hope, encouraged us to pursue it. Amen.