

HAGGAI 1: 15-2:9

WUC November 10, 2013

“On the 24th day of the month, in the 6th month, in the second year of King Darius, in the 7th month, on the 21st day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying:

'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 – Who is left among you who 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, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord.

Take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest;

take courage, all of 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.

For thus says the Lord of hosts;

One thing more:

in a little while, 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 shall come

and I will fill this house with splendour

says the Lord of hosts.

The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts.

The latter splendour of the house shall be greater than the former says the Lord of hosts

and in the place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

I was all set to preach the Luke reading today. Let me tell you why I changed my mind.

I have to tell you two things that will help you understand:

First, I've been thinking about Remembrance Day, and reading some of the stories of the people who came home from WW1 and WW2, and their families. Many did *not* come home of course. But for those who did.....everything –*everything* – had changed.

They had gone to war, many of them, with stars in their eyes, full of ideals and believing that they were saving the world. Perhaps they were.

But they came back changed inside: wounded in every way by what they had endured. And they came back to families that also had changed. Partners who had been coping for years alone and who in some ways seemed like strangers..., children who didn't even recognize them....

Overseas in the theatre of war, inside the soldiers themselves, and at home - something precious had been lost. War leaves rubble everywhere. Nothing was the same

they had to begin to build homes and families all over again, out of what was left to them. Some of those families never made it.

Second: Last week I was at a meeting of Conference – and had lots of conversation with colleagues – about the church....inevitably these days, we talk about what the future might hold for us as a church. We have been insulated quite a bit here in Whitehorse– but things are very tough across Canada not only for UCC but for others as well. It's not the way it used to be.

For me, there are days when I hardly recognize us as the church I joined, committed to, and was trained

to serve.

As a teenager, when I was confirmed, I was proud to be part of this national church that took risks to speak truth to power; that stood in the proud heritage of the Reformation and valued critical thinking, education, risk taking for justice, and never, *ever* claimed to have the full truth. When I joined, Dr. Bob McClure was the Moderator. And when Bob spoke, people listened. We were part of some powerful and passionate national coalitions.

And theologically, people knew that there was a choice open to them: a church open to the revelations of science, open to critique of scripture.... And now.... now, for example, we're told that people on the street don't even know what the UCC is, and on average we are closing one church a week. ONE A WEEK.

It feels like something precious has been lost. We are surrounded by the rubble of what used to be a great and glorious thing. It's not the same. And there are days when it hurts. It really hurts.

One more thing: listening to the news lately....could make a person despair, could make you ask "does *anyone* tell the truth? EVER?"

And maybe there never was a time when what happens among our politicians was honourable and trustworthy...maybe I'm living in a nostalgic fairy tale butit's just been feeling to me that....there's a lot of rubble. Something precious has been lost.

And if *I'm* feeling that way, what about the people even older than I – I talked with some of those older people at conference. The world, our country, our church – the former glory – is gone and they are aching inside for the loss of something to which they have given their lives

So all of that was swirling around in my head and heart and then I read these words

(read the passage)

and I started to cry. And that's one sure sign that I need to preach this text.

I'll give you some background – perhaps it will be review for you, or perhaps new. Either way, here's where we are in this reading:

Babylon conquered first the northern kingdom, and then the southern Kingdom of Israel and Judah in the year 586 BCE. The people were taken into captivity in Babylon. (not all of them; just those who were useful. People who were old, or sick, or in some other way burdensome, were left behind – all the trades people, and the intelligentsia, and the poets of course, were taken. If you want to really crush a people, muzzle their poets.)That's what Babylon did. For 70 years they lived, captive in Babylon. (by the rivers of Babylon...)

Now, to be fair, a lot of the best theology and scripture writing happened there, as it does, when people's worlds are shaken. That's when we think, ask the meaning questions, and forge new ways of doing things.

For example this is when the first chapter of Genesis was written. There they were, captive, forced to live in a foreign land, wondering if God had forsaken them, or if there even WAS a God.....feeling that the world was meaningless and cruel.

Into this atmosphere, a priest writes: In the beginning, God created the world. AND IT WAS GOOD. There they were among people who worshipped the sun and moon. The priest writes – God CREATED the sun and the moon....AND IT WAS VERY GOOD.

I could go on but this is not a sermon on Genesis....but there in Babylon they sat and wept and longed for

the day they'd go home. Some of their poets and prophets said "God will take us home – God will rescue us and it will be like the Exodus....there will be a triumphant march across the desert and the desert will bloom and there will be trumpets and.....
for 70 years they waited and dreamed

and then

Persia conquered Babylon, and let them go home. Just like that. Cyrus of Persia comes to Babylon to see this country that his troops have taken....and he finds there, communities of Jews. He says "What are *you* doing here?" and they say "We were dragged here when Babylon conquered our land – we've been dreaming about going home for years" and Cyrus said "off you go, then"

And they did.

It was NOT a triumphant march across the desert. Not all of them even went, in the end. But a scraggly band of them went back. And the promised land that they had prayed and sung and dreamed about for 70 years? That land was trashed – ruined. Rubble. No temple, and the people who had stayed behind had been doing their best, but they had intermarried with the other peoples, and nothing was the same. Nothing.

They started arguing about whether or not to rebuild the temple, and they did, in the end. You can imagine. When the first temple was built, Solomon had at his command all the resources of a powerful nation and its allies. Gold, silver, skilled workers, imported goods.....it was lavish and glorious.

With the second temple....

well...

not so much.

Ezra tells us that when the foundation was finally laid,

Read Ezra 3: 11-13

They began to build, with whatever resources were left to them, and with a scraggly group of workers. Work stopped. It just wasn't worth it - it would never be the same....they could never ever rebuild what they had lost. And they stopped. And then Haggai speaks to them.

read it 2: 1-5

Just build it. Work. Don't be afraid. Don't lose heart.

He calls out to them by name. You, Zerubbabel - don't give up. You, Joshua. Take heart.

Work at this. It's not what you thought, it's not what you'd like it to be but it's what you have.

So...just do it.

And don't ever think that God isn't there with you. God is not, primarily, in the showy, dazzling things of this world. God is patiently, ingloriously, in the mud and the rubble and the disappointment and the dust. Just work. And don't lose heart.

For people who are living at a time when it seems so much has been lost it might be tempting to just give up and say nothing can be done.

It's not the same. What's the use?

Of course it's not the same. And that is sad. And much HAS been lost

But the Lord of Hosts, the force of life, the beating heart of the Universe, the God of the rubble thrusts a rusty hammer into our clenched fist and says - here. Start with this one nail. Work. Work. And

don't lose heart.

There are temples yet to be built. There are stories still to be told. Kind words to be spoken. Life to be lived.

There are worlds as yet unseen and there is precious life force beating strong in your veins. Yes - there are temples left to be built, and you are the ones to build them.

Work. And do not lose heart.

Remember Colombo? Peter Falk? Remember how he used to interview a suspect then start to leave and then say "oh just one more thing" and that would be the clincher?

Haggai, speaking for God, does the same thing here. Here, it's God with that trench coat and a cigar saying

Vs 6 - end

ISN'T THAT GREAT????

So maybe we take our rusty tools and start piling up broken pieces into something that might do....trusting that step by step this the next right thing to do. And maybe we learn thatthat's ok

AND THEN

GOD DOES SOMETHING COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED - THE EARTH SHAKES AND THE GLORY IS REVEALED in ways we never ever could have anticipated.

The creating, liberating, life giving Spirit of the Living God enlivens a new foundation, strengthens a new structure and steadies the ground beneath the quake

The spirit without which there can be nothing but broken stones.

God is always ready to part a sea, to open a way, to shake up false foundations and strengthen the new ones. God is always up for a miracle!

It's not over. This world has just begun. And WHO KNOWS what is going to happen next? Who knows what is possible

And should we, drop our hands and our tools in despair

abandoning the hope we have so lately, imperfectly learned?

THAT would be the betrayal. THAT would obscure the glory and even then

God's earth shaking spirit will rise

and the Glory will again fill the temple we thought to commonplace

Whatever the rubble of this world
whatever temples lay in ruins
let's work to rebuild and not lose heart
and leave room for the Spirit
who will say

Oh - and one more thing?

and ploughshares shall be made from swords
and lambs and lions shall lie down together
and Popes shall speak of justice in ways until now undreamed of
and honour shall be restored to public life
and the people shall rise up for justice for the land

and all the people said amen

AMEN