

“A Different Message”

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

A great church building has risen in Barcelona, Spain. The Sagrada Familia Church has been opening its doors for worship for just a decade now, even though it has been under construction for a very long time. D’aun and I got to see it up close just before its opening.

The building is remarkable for its unique architecture. One architectural critique has described it this way, “From a distance, the four main towers”, (on the west end,) “of the church look like giant drip sand castles on the beach. But as you get closer, you discover that these intricate towers are psychedelic, spindle-shaped, mind-bending masterpieces.” To us some of the spires looked like honey-combed spindles, while others, on the east end looked like melting drip candles from the top of a wine bottle. In places, such as the entrances, the arches over the doors looked as though everything had melted and congealed in a glob of stone. It’s an amazing expression of an architect’s vision, and a congregation’s determination to realize it.

But the church is also remarkable for how long it has taken to come into service as the house of its congregation. It’s been under construction for 135 years, and, even now, it isn’t completed. It’s expected that it will be completed by 2026, just in time for the 200th anniversary of its architect, Antoni Gaudi’s birth. It is projected to have over eighteen spires by then, including one central spire soaring so high that it will make it the tallest church structure in the world.

Over time the building project has been criticized for its great expense. But those critics have often been silenced when they have discovered the level of the congregation’s outreach. Gaudi had conceived of this church as “A cathedral of the poor.” And the congregation has attempted to live up to that ideal. Today, as in the past, the congregation of The Holy Family, continues to make the education of

the poorest of its city's children their mission. Their educational program for children and youth from ages 3 through 16 is considered among the best and most advanced in Spain. This is a congregation that has proved faithful to its vision; the spiritual and the physical well-being of all people; especially the poor. Worship, and building this place for worship, keeps that vision of outreach focused.

Then there's St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Just six years ago the congregation of that great vision of Sir Christopher Wren completed the most extensive restoration in its three-hundred-year history. Thoroughly cleaned, regilded, and restored, top to bottom, this labor of love by the nation has taken years. It is actually the fourth cathedral building erected on that site; the first having been started back in the late 500's A.D. Those who only know St. Paul's as the site of great and solemn national ceremonies have criticized this expense too. But the congregation of St. Paul's is not daunted. As they have done throughout its history, the people of this church still make their outreach to the poorest of the poor, now not just in England, but around the world. This is a congregation that also understands that it is its worship that centers and directs its mission.

So, let's consider, this morning, a congregation that did neither of these things well; neither worshiping well nor doing outreach well. This is usually how it is; when a congregation ignores either one of these, it fails in the other also. We meet such a congregation in our Old Testament lesson from the book of the prophet Haggai. Haggai is one of the Bible's lesser known prophets. His book is a mere two chapters long, but he had something important to say to the people of his day, and to us, as well. Haggai is a postexilic prophet; he preached to the people of Judah after their return from exile in Babylon.

But the Jerusalem to which they returned was a heartbreaking sight. The city walls were down, rubble lay heaped where homes had once

stood, and the temple, the heart of Judah's worship, was in ruins. Within the first year of coming back, the returnees made a halfhearted attempt to clear the temple foundations, but they soon lost interest. Who could blame them? Things really weren't going very well, and the nearby Samaritans were harassing them. Dealing with harsh realities of daily existence occupied most of their time and energy. When Haggai comes onto the scene 18 years after the return, he observes: "Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes

But Haggai has the word of the Lord, and he tells the people they have their priorities wrong. Speaking of the temple, he says, "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4). No, he says, they should first rebuild the temple, take care of God's house, its worship and outreach, and then turn to their own comforts. The people respond, and within five years, the work on the temple is complete, and they rejoice.

One characteristic that distinguishes Haggai is his message about the temple. The pre-exilic prophets (those who preached before the exile and while Solomon's temple was still standing) also cherished God's house. But, as the Prophet Jeremiah did, they chided the people for worshiping the temple, while ignoring justice and mercy. Haggai, on the other hand, urges the people to get serious about returning to worship, and rebuilding the temple.

Why the seeming difference in message? The people of Jeremiah's time were ignoring God by failing to live their faith in ministering to the poor. The people of Haggai's day were ignoring God by failing to center that faith in worship. As a result, they were doing neither thing well. Haggai's direction was different from Jeremiah's in that the

congregation now needed to hear the other side of the coin, as it were. For Haggai's people, rebuilding the temple needed to take precedence over making themselves comfortable.

In differing times, the prophets have called their people to faithfulness in differing ways. We here at Christ Church are now in differing times. We are in a stewardship campaign in the middle of a period of transition; calling for your treasures of time, and talent, and money to be brought into this temple even as we search for new leadership and direction. What you bring in now will let us reaffirm and continue to do all those good ministries of outreach to the poor we do already with others in this faith community, and in the community around us, and even consider expanding them. And, what you bring personally and from your pocket, will also help us to prepare more effectively for deepening the worship life of this temple where new leadership will guide; leadership and worship that God is already preparing for us.

So, does the Prophet Haggai have a prophetic word from God for us here in Christ Church this morning as we begin our 225th year anniversary of worship and outreach? Yes! And, it's found in verses 4 and 5. Hear the word of the Lord! "Yet now take courage; take courage, all you people...says the Lord; work, for I am with you...My spirit abides among you; do not fear." (Haggai 2: 4&5) By God's Spirit among us, we can take courage and set to work.

Transitions bring change, and change brings uncertainty, but it need not be feared. God is with us; so, what will we look to do for the future, what do you hope for, what will you pray for, what will we work for to the praise of God's glory in this temple? This is the Prophet Haggai's word from God for you and me: worship, pray, dream, and work, and fear not!

May the God who has done so much for you and me bless this house of prayer, and lead us in everything we do, every breath we take, to worship and work and dream. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.