

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

November 10, 2013

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

Text -- Haggai 1:15b-2:9

For years, I lived within walking distance of the Bahai Temple in Wilmette. On clear nights, with stars — and maybe even a bright moon, I could stand on the adjacent fairway, gazing up at the intricately carved, nine-sided dome, open like the bud of a flower, and pointing skyward. I felt a sense of awe and prayerfulness as I experienced that human tribute to the glory of God.

There have been other similar times—visits to medieval cathedrals in England and Western Europe, the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque in Istanbul, with their flying buttresses, or domes or soaring spires, the vaulted ceilings, frescoes and stained glass windows. Such moments are profoundly touching, even breathtaking when the soul and all senses are engaged by the beauty of works created by human hands and minds to glorify God. Music, art, architecture engaged all connecting with the joy and hope of humanity reaching toward God. It is easy to understand how the people of Israel felt about their Temple.

Haggai is an obscure prophet—one of twelve “minor” prophets in Hebrew scriptures, but it is an important and authoritative message that is contained in just two chapters written over a 5 month period in 520 BCE. His oracle is given at a very explicit and significant time—the seventh of the eight-day autumn festival called the Feast of Booths. This festival, which takes place shortly after the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur, celebrates the harvest and God’s sustaining care. It commemorates the dedication of the temple of Solomon and the placing of the Ark of the Covenant within it. It also is a remembrance of Israel’s release from bondage in Egypt and how the people lived in tents (or booths) as they traveled in the wilderness. Thus it looks to the past, to the tradition, to

remember God's presence and acts with them through the ages. Even as it looks in expectation toward God's continuing presence.

This particular year more than 2500 years ago, the people were returning from nearly 50 years of exile in Babylon and trying to pick up the pieces of their lives. Their first temple, built by King Solomon to house the Ark of the Covenant that contained the 10 Commandments on stone tablet, had been destroyed and desecrated. The Ark had disappeared forever.

It was a terrible thing! It was like the end of the world—a true religious crisis that brought into question Israel's very central understandings. The line of King David had been defeated. The house of their God was destroyed. Had Yahweh deserted the chosen people? Were the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah right—that it was caused because the people were faithless to the covenant? Was Yahweh the true God, or was it really Marduk, the god of the Babylonians?

The exile lasted until the Babylonians were defeated by King Cyrus of Persia in 538 BCE. Cyrus was benevolent toward the exiles and allowed them not only to return to Jerusalem BUT to begin rebuilding their temple. Yet, some 16 years after the return began, they had not yet done so, being preoccupied in rebuilding their own homes and planting crops, dealing with the hunger and poverty resulting from droughts and poor harvests. And here Haggai enters, insisting that the rebuilding of the temple be the priority.

Now, I imagine this remnant consisted of several types of people. Right off the bat, there were those who were never deported. They took over the land left by those who were, so they didn't welcome the exiles back and were hostile to the rebuilding. Then there were some who actually remembered the Temple of Solomon in all its glory. For them, the preliminary work was disappointing. They stared at the foundations and the burned-out ruins and complained that nothing would ever match what was before. Still others, I imagine, wondered what all the fuss is about. They got along fine in exile without a temple. Besides, if Yahweh had abandoned them or was not the true God after all, what was the

point of going to all the effort and expense? Better to get on with their homes and crops.

But there were also those who took up Haggai's vision. It is unusual--most often, prophets preach against bricks and mortar and superficial worship practices. We also might be perplexed at his suggestion that the drought and poverty happened because God was unhappy with them for not rebuilding the temple. It's deeper than that, though. Haggai wasn't suggesting that God needed a temple in which to live or that God had caused drought and was looking for appeasement. He was telling people that they needed to take a look at their lives and reorder them. Their efforts were for themselves only, building their own homes. They needed to turn back to God, to honor God and to give God at least as much as they were giving to themselves. They needed to be courageous, too, because there would be detractors—people who thought the new temple didn't measure up to the “good old days.” But Haggai assured them that its splendor would exceed that of the former temple, but that the splendor—the gold and silver—would be God's own, not theirs.

You see, the temple had been such a strong symbol of these people's faith and religious life—ever since the Ark came to Jerusalem, ever since that first temple was built. So, rebuilding meant reestablishing this center, creating sacred space for people who had been so far from home for so long, for people who had forgotten its importance. This was a way to reunite them, reconnect them as a faith community, and rekindle their sense of identity as God's people. And remind them of God's faithfulness and continuing presence. God had been with these people through the ages and continued to be with them in this time and place and into the future.

Furthermore, though it was not going to be like the former temple (after all, it couldn't be—the Ark was gone), God would do a new thing. And, indeed, that was the case. The first temple had been primarily a place for the king, his household and important people. The ordinary people did not gather there.

This temple became a center for the community. The people came for worship, but it also figured in the rebuilding of the society and the economy. For example, it was the temple that established a way of redistributing the land that had been snapped up by those not deported to Babylon. So, the temple was a force for justice and stability in the society.

We don't have temples like this anymore. Even the temple in Jerusalem is long gone, though its site remains one of the most explosive centers in today's Israel Palestine conflicts and some groups hope for its restoration. Certainly, some of the cathedrals in England and Europe served as centers of the community in medieval times. But today, many are little more than museums and tourist sites, though some like Washington National and our own St. James cathedrals are actively trying to change that by becoming gathering places once again.

And that, I think, is a good thing. Is our society not in a kind of exile? Are there not people seeking for meaning and significance? People who are distrustful of organized religions of the way we "do church." People who say that being in a worshiping community is not important—God is everywhere and can be found elsewhere. They have a point—some of our buildings are little more than museums. Some of them have reached the point of idols—revered for their bricks and mortar, their splendor, rather than for what God and God's people are doing within. In some, all the attention goes to maintenance and programs for those who are "insiders" and there is nothing left over for the church's mission.

What was the vision of the founders of Grace Church in the 1820s and in 1835 when it was established? What were their hopes and dreams for the buildings where they met and then for this one, grander and more permanent, designed to meet the growing needs of the parish? Imagine what it was like for those who worked so hard for this building, only to have the church reduced to mission status because it couldn't support itself—and then to be restored to a full

parish!

This church building is truly a wonderful legacy. And we must be grateful to all who made it possible and have kept it shining here on this hill on Prospect Avenue through the years. And we must give thanks to God for all the ministry that has taken place within these walls and in the community.

We must also heed the words of Haggai, for they are just as important in 2013 CE as they were in 520 BCE. God has been present here. God *is* present here. And God *will continue* to be present here. The hope for the Realm of God here on earth is surely ours. We must be continually reminded to have courage in seeking out what God hopes for us to be and to do in this place. There will be detractors who cannot see what is good when it differs from what was. We must guard against confusing the building itself with the purpose for which it was built. We must not fall in love with the wrong things. Rather, we should focus on how the building helps us welcome and care for God's people, how it is the base from which to do God's work for the community and the world, a place for worship and fellowship, a place to be hospitable to our members and to the stranger, a place for mission. A place where inspiration and transformation may emerge and relationships may be nurtured. A place where beauty, music, worship and all that happens here is an offering to God and brings glory to God. A place where God will do a new thing. God will fill this house with splendor:

The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former...and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.