

Proper 27 C
Haggai 1:16-2:9
Luke 20:27-38
November 11, 2007

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

The Old Testament passage this week spoke to me in a direct way as I prepared for today, in a personal way. I found myself looking back over the past year and a half, which has been an especially hard piece of road for me. I feel like you've heard enough about me and all my dramas to last you a long time. But the fact is, this personal place is the perspective from which I hear the Word this week, and I think there's a word for all of us in it.

It does feel like these past months have been a string of crises in my life, one after the other. I'm even tired of hearing about it, so I'll just hit the high points. Cancer, the death of my father, the flooding of the parsonage, surgery and a car wreck, all in a year and a half. Sometimes life comes at you like that, all clumped up. And while some of those events were more minor than others, when they all pile on, it can be very hard, or it has been for me. And my question when these things happen is not, "How can God let this happen?" In the really hard times, my question is, "How am I supposed to get through this? Why should I keep trying to find a better place?"

There are people, of course, who go through much, much worse, who have longer stretches of terrible trials. I've watched a couple of shows this week that were on in honor of Veterans Day—one was about WWII and the other about the conquest of the Iraqi insurgent city of Fallujah. One of the WWII vets said he was just scared all the time. He performed great acts of bravery on behalf of his men. But he was scared,

all the time. The Marines in Fallujah talked about clearing the houses, going from door to door, never knowing what trap might lie inside, and how hard it was to watch fellow soldiers die. There are regular families, too, who have to live through the same nightmare, if they're unfortunate enough to live in war zones—they wonder every time they leave the house whether they'll see each other again. These describe a prolonged kind of trauma that is hard to imagine for anyone who hasn't been through it.

So what makes the difference for these people? What makes people able to keep going? Sometimes it's just adrenaline, or some longer term version of it. When I was taking radiation treatments last year after chemo, I found myself really sad for the first time since my diagnosis six months before. My doctor told me this is very common, that we put on a game face when it's really hard and leave in on for as long as we have to. Once we take it off is when we feel all the stuff we've been putting to the side. He said he served as a medic in Vietnam, and he never took R&R in two years there. He saw guys go away and relax and then come back and have a horrible time readjusting. So he just never left. I don't know how long humans can keep up that kind of front; I guess it just depends.

But sometimes you just don't have it in you. Maybe you're not getting shot at; you're not going to die; you're just in the middle of a grind that is more than you think you can manage, more than you really want to manage. What gets us through then?

I'm not sure why it is, but when I am in that kind of spot, I am somehow most available to the word of hope that comes from God. I don't always believe it, and it doesn't change how I feel, but I want it to be true, so it draws me in. That's what I

heard in the text from Haggai this week. Since I'm guessing that Haggai may not be the best known book in the Bible to many of you, let me give describe to you the context of today's passage.

Haggai was a prophet to the people of Israel after they had returned from exile in Babylon. The people had to leave the promised land after their kingdom of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians in about 586 BCE. They stayed in exile until about 539, when Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and allowed all the captives to go home. He encouraged them to practice their own religions again and was generally very benevolent.

The people of Judah returned to the land to find that other people had been living there and weren't real glad to see them come back. It was hard to get re-established after being gone for so long. Then there was the question of how this could have happened to God's people in the first place. How could God take away the promised land? How could they have let themselves go so far astray that God would let their covenant be broken? They had the land back, but did they have God? What future could there be for them now?

A visible symbol of the people's plight was the Temple, or the lack thereof. For the Temple of Solomon, which was destroyed when the people were taken captive,

had truly been a magnificent structure, crafted by imported artisans and ornamented by skilled craftsmen (1 Kg 5). Whether or not they are precisely accurate, the traditions remembered an enormous amount of labor involved in the building: 30,000 Israelites cutting and transporting timber, 80,000 stonecutters, 70,000 laborers, and 3,300 supervisors (1 Kg 5:13-18). Even with all of the skilled labor and the resources and wealth of Solomon, it took seven years to complete the Temple, and another 13 years to finish the palace and surrounding compounds (1 Kg 5-6). It had

been the edifice of an Empire at its height. There was no way that this small group of priests and dedicated worshippers, perhaps numbering under 20,000, could duplicate that grandeur. At best, they could only rebuild on a smaller scale what had already been built, restacking stones and rebuilding walls. (Dennis Bratcher, Copyright © 2006, 11/11/07, cresourcei.org)

By the time of this reading, twenty years had passed since the people had arrived home, and the community project of rebuilding the temple had fallen by the wayside. A foundation had been laid, but aside from that there were just the stones of the old temple, lying around in piles on the ground. People were concerned with building up their own homes, with just trying to make it. They'd pulled away from each other, and it was becoming more and more likely that the people who followed the one God Yahweh would lose their identity as a community completely. There would be nothing left to bind them together. For it was their common faith that made them a nation, and they had no place where they could practice that faith. They had no temple and had given up thinking it could make any difference to them if they did. What was the point, since God had abandoned them anyway?

It is into this context that Haggai comes as a prophet of God, and he brings an important word. "Take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord...for I am with you... My spirit abides among you; do not fear." Somehow for me, both personally and in what I've seen through the work of the church, that word of God is just about the most powerful thing we have. It is in that word that I personally place my trust—in the voice of God saying, "I am with you." Very often we hear that word through the presence of real people saying, "I am with you." You know, I'm sure, what an enormous difference it makes not to have to be alone in times of trouble. Even if

folks can't fix it for us, just to have somebody with us can be a real source of strength. Or at the very least, it can keep us from giving up.

"Does anyone here remember what this house used to look like?" Haggai asked the people. "Do you see that all we're going to be able to do here is to restack the old stones, in kind of a lean-to temple? Do you see how sad that is, when we think of what we've lost?" Knowing that, he says, hear this—God has not left us. God is here! God is the one who brought us back here, just like God brought our ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. God is doing a new thing here, the next chapter in our story as God's people. There really is going to be a next chapter!

But Haggai doesn't just tell the people that God is still with them. He doesn't just try to make them feel better. He also says, "Get to work. You've got to build this thing back up. You have to have a place where you know you can come and look for God. Do not be swayed by what you see around you. Look beyond what is, and try to see what is not yet. Then do something to put your stake in that vision, to claim God's promise."

Here I find a word for us as a church, pretty directly, without much translation. And the word from God is, "trust and believe that I am at work here, in your community of faith and in your lives. You may be wondering or worrying about the future; you may look with nostalgia at the past. But I am with you; I stand in the midst of you. So now do something with that; take my presence to heart," God says, "and act into the future I am promising you." Our circumstances may not change immediately; we may

continue to struggle with what is happening. But the presence of God, our Maker, our Lover, our Strong Defender, will give us what we need to keep going.

One writer said, "it is much easier to wait for God to bring revival, or even to pray for God to bring revival, than it is to put out the tedious effort to go out into the highways and byways of life and actually find the people who need revival. It is easier to complain about all the problems of our communities and our churches and wait for God to do work some miracle to solve the problems than it is for us to sit down and begin finding some solutions ourselves. We cannot always make things happen immediately. But it is likely that if the trees never get cut, if the people never do any work, there will never be a temple. And without the temple, there may no longer be a people!" (ibid.)

"I will fill this house with splendor," God promises. "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine," says the Lord. True splendor comes not from the riches of the nations, not from what looks like success. True splendor comes from the holy presence of God, from holy presence of Love itself in the midst of the people. This is how God has promised to fill this house, and this is the purpose for which God promises to use us. Life can be extremely hard; it can wear us down. But thanks be to God, we have the Word, the living Word, the Word made incarnate in the love and life of Jesus, the Word we speak to each other when we pick each other up. Take courage, and work, for God is with us. God's spirit abides among us; do not fear. Reach out and claim this word with me, brothers and sisters, for I believe God plans to do a new and wondrous thing with us and through us, in our lives and in this house.