

Haggai 2:1-9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first 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 that 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 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: Once again, 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 splendor, says the LORD of hosts. 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, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

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Rebuilding a Temple

In January, I first met with the Vestry and Parish Council of King's Chapel, to discern together whether I might be called to serve as the new minister here. Sometime during those conversations, I referred to members of King's Chapel as the "holy remnant."

Holy Remnant! Some eyebrows raised, some eyes widened. Holy remnant? What did that mean?

Because a remnant could sound like the leftovers, the dribs and drabs. For those who sew, remnants are the small pieces of fabric left on a bolt when most of the yardage has been sold, pieces of cloth that cannot be easily used for most sewing projects, cannot be made into a full dress or be sewn into a full length drape.

But that was not the image I had in mind when I called you a "holy remnant."

I meant the term holy remnant in the way it is used in the Bible by the prophet Haggai, whom we read today. He calls the people of Jerusalem a remnant because they are the faithful few left after hard times, the ones who've lasted, the survivors. As used biblically, a remnant can also be the cutting of a plant – the small piece that transplanted into fertile soil brings forth a whole new growth, a bounty, where earlier there was too little.

For the prophet Haggai, the holy remnant is the small, faithful group whom God calls, and says: Rebuild my community!

So I named you here at King's Chapel the holy remnant, because I am impressed by you who have loyally stayed on despite the hard times in the last decade. You are the ones who remain from what was once a larger group, just as was true of the ancient ones returning to Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile to whom Haggai spoke.

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Step back into time with me, into the narratives recorded in the Old Testament. In the history of the Hebrew people, there are two defining stories of God's steadfast presence told and retold.

The first is the Exodus: the people's slavery in Egypt, and God's delivery of them, led by the prophet Moses, wandering through the wilderness, and then finding their way back into the Promised Land. Historians would say that this took place sometime between 1500 and 1200 BC or BCE, Before the Common Era, as is said now. The first central story: the Exodus.

The second major story arc is the subject of today's reading from Haggai: the Exile and Return. For a short time there was unity in the Promised Land, when King David brought all the tribes together and founded Jerusalem as their capital, when David's Son Solomon built the majestic Temple to their God in Jerusalem -- all actual history that took place around 1000 BCE. But after that hey day the Hebrew people soon split again into factions, and warred among themselves. By 587 BCE, even the last stronghold, Jerusalem, with its fortified wall, could no longer stand against outside forces.

The Babylonian Empire swept in, destroyed the magnificent Temple -- the Hebrews' very center of worship and existence -- and brutally exiled all the people far away from their homeland, into present day Iraq. Many of the poignant psalms and Lamentations in our Bible were written during the Exile:

“By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion (Jerusalem).
...On the willows there we hung up our harps.
How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137: 1-2, 4).

For 50 years the Hebrew people from Jerusalem languished in exile -- away from their land, away from their Temple, until the Babylonians were themselves toppled by the Persians: Iran defeating Iraq. This change in the international power politics was good for the Hebrews, because the Persian King Cyrus had a different philosophy of war: rather than dispersing a conquered people away from their territories, Cyrus was willing to have the Hebrew people return to their homeland, and even rebuild their Temple, so long as they remained subjects of the Persian empire. They would never again be independent, with their own King.

Two huge, defining events for the people: Exodus from slavery into Freedom, a time to define themselves as God's people, receive the Ten Commandments, and build their Temple in the promised land; and the second, the Exile and Return, time again to begin afresh, time to regroup as the remnant that had made it back to Jerusalem.

But now the holy remnant, those left, would need to rebuild their lives under new circumstances, different from their previous lives, and full of challenge. What had they learned? What did they need?

What can we learn from them?

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Haggai enters this scene, after the Exile and Return to Jerusalem. His small book, from which we read, covers a specific period of four months. He first exhorts the people to start rebuilding the Temple, since it is 20 years after they've returned to Jerusalem. Then, in the segment we read today, Haggai returns to urge the people to continue the work they've begun, to have courage.

In Chapter 1 of his book Haggai makes the first plea. He notes that the people have rebuilt their own houses – fine, paneled houses, probably an allusion to the paneled home in which King Solomon had lived.

But the people haven't started construction on the Temple: they have said "the time has not yet come to rebuild" the Lord's house. Haggai declares: "My house lies in ruins, says the Lord of hosts, while all of you hurry off to your own houses."

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Hmmm..... Now, on the one hand, for people who have been through hard times, who have been exiled, and only recently returned, it seems natural that they would hunker down and first focus on what they need to rebuild for themselves: their houses, the roof over their heads. Providing for these basics of life for children, for elders, for the tired ones returning from exile, *is* of God, I am convinced.

But Haggai raises questions about proportionality: Should God's house lie in ruins while the people hurry off to their paneled houses? What's a better balance, asks God?

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In the novel, [The Great Divorce](#), by the 20th century British writer and Oxford don, C.S. Lewis, Lewis envisions hell as a place where people can very easily focus on their own houses, on all their own wants – because you can have whatever you

want, just by imagining it! In this fantasy conjured by Lewis, when it comes to houses, "you've only got to think a house and there it is."¹ So in hell, anytime you quarrel with a neighbor, you just "think" a new house on the next street over, and you can move right in, away from the irritating fools you want to leave behind.

And even if later someone else moves nearby, and another quarrel erupts, you simply move further out. In time, due to their fights and factions, the inhabitants of hell move far beyond the town lines, forever spreading out, more and more alone, leaving more and more empty streets downtown.

The most contentious – and as a good Brit, Lewis casts Napoleon as one of these – those who've been in hell longest, are astronomical distances away from City Center, the spot where the daily bus arrives to take up to heaven anyone who wants to go there. That bus ride is free, too. But once people live so very, very far away from the bus stop, focusing always on themselves and the next thing they can imagine for themselves, they're so far from the City Center that they stop even thinking about the bus anymore.

Hell, Lewis is saying, is being very far apart from others. Hell is when we focus on ourselves, and our things, rather than on our lives with others, and the journey we can be on with one another, towards greater love and community, when God's "will is done on earth as it is in heaven."

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So when Haggai the prophet asks the people, "What about building not only your own fine homes, but God's house, too," it is not the question of a petulant God who demands or even needs attention. Rather, it's a question from a God of Love who wants to reorient the people – away from a hell of their own creation. Away from a life separated from their community, caring mainly for themselves. God wants to re-orient them back towards the re-creation of their beloved community again.

God yearns for the rebuilding of God's *people*, after their time in exile; for the rebuilding of their community space - the temple – where the people of God come together and remember that they are not alone.

Build up the place for community, says God, and you will thrive!

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¹ C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce (1946; Macmillan Publishing, NYC, 23rd edition 1979), pp. 18-20.

Here at King's Chapel, this task of rebuilding may sound familiar. How do we, the remnant who are left, build up this place of Love again, the place of community, for us and for our city? How do we invite others in to build our community with us?

According to the book of Haggai, the Temple was rebuilt, into even greater glory, 1) when the prophet Haggai asked the people honest questions; 2) when God said to the people, "I am with you"; and 3) when the Lord "stirred up the spirit" of the leaders and of all the remnant, and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts."

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This week members will receive our first Budget Narrative. We've realized that to build up King's Chapel again, we first need to gather the whole people together, and gather our facts, ask our honest questions. So everyone will get the facts we're learning, both about income and expenses.

On the spending side, you'll see what we spend and how – including taking my salary and splitting it over the different things I do. Do you think it's a good split, or not? What more should I do, and what less?

On the income side, you'll see how much we get from endowment (far too much), members (too little), and tourists (about the same as we get from members). You'll also see how we stack up against other neighborhood churches, including Advent, Old South and Trinity. And with these facts in hand, we'll ask, at a congregational meeting next week, How can we best rebuild this place, King's Chapel, into the community of God's people we want to be?

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In the reading from Haggai that was appointed for today by the lectionary, it is three weeks after the Temple building project has begun. Of course it isn't finished – it's only begun. Rebuilding always takes some time.

Haggai asks, "How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" Perhaps the people felt as we do today: a few new steps have been taken, a new minister is on board, and things have started to happen. But have the pews filled yet? How does it look to *you* now?

Haggai says to the people words for us, too: Take courage! Take courage, leaders. Take courage, priest and minister. Take courage, all you people, the remnant: "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.....The later splendor of this house shall be [even] *greater* than the former...."

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Friends, the reason I come back to church, here to King's Chapel, Sunday after Sunday, is to help build with you God's beloved community.

I come because, like the people of Jerusalem in 500 BCE who faced rebuilding their destroyed Temple, I am told here the ancient stories *that still are true*.

Here, I am reminded again of the great historic tales: of the Exodus, when people who were enslaved in Egypt were freed, to begin a new life and build their first temple.

I come here because I am told another true story from history: \of the Exile and Return, when the temple in Jerusalem *was* rebuilt.

Exodus into *Freedom*. Exile *and* Return. A temple crushed, but *rebuilt*.

And behind all that, enabling all that, a God – a power in the universe beyond us that conveys this timeless message: Do not fear. Take courage. I am with you.

In our lives, each of us face times of enslavement: perhaps to disease or discrimination, perhaps to despair or defeat. We think we'll never be free of it. We are oppressed, pressed down, enchained, without hope.

But here we proclaim *this* Truth: God is with us, working with us *for our freedom*. Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on!

In our lives, each of us face times of exile: exile from jobs we once held or a purpose we had; exile from friends and family, from the place we lived or from cherished hopes we've had. We feel banished, homeless, adrift in a foreign land.

But here we proclaim *this* Truth: Do not fear. God is working with us to bring us home. Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on!

In our lives, each of us faces times of destruction: when all around us the majestic Temple of our faith or our marriage or our dream stands in ruins around us. We have so much to do, we don't even know how to start rebuilding.

But here we proclaim *this* Truth: Take Courage. God's spirit abides with us, and working *with* one another, *for* one another, as a community, the edifice that has crumbled can be rebuilt, into even greater splendor than before. Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on!

Even when what we face is the end of our lives, our death, we are not alone. In some way beyond our imagining, as the gospel of Luke proclaimed today, there is something for us that God will construct, of even more majesty than what we've known here. So

we need not be afraid. Take courage. Hold on to the Love that will *always* hold onto you.

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Friends, there will be days here at King's Chapel when we feel like the mere remnant of a people. But have you seen the beauty of remnants and what can be done with them? Creatively. Beautifully. With God's guidance and might:

The small piece of fabric that becomes the very centerpiece of a new, stunning quilt; the small clipping of a plant that grows to transform a landscape; the stone that the builders rejected that becomes the cornerstone of a momentous new project. ²

May we, with all those who have built God's beloved community before us, keep our eyes on the prize. Hold on!

I'm excited to dream – and build - with you all. Amen.

² Matthew 21:42