

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

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THE EDGE OF SOMETHING WONDERFUL

"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." *Haggai 2:9*

This text from the prophet Haggai is the only time the book is opened in the three year cycle of the lectionary. Israel had been seventy years in exile (ca. 520-90 B.C.), a time so long that virtually no one among the thousands who were exiled to Babylon came back, only their descendants. During that deportation the Priests addressed the deep religious questions that Israel—who understood themselves as “the people of God”—suffered by their sense of God’s abandonment of them to a hostile power in a strange land. No less than a third of the Old Testament was written at this time, including powerful narratives like the six days of creation in Genesis 1 and Noah’s building of the ark. All harbor profound religious meaning.

When they were restored to the land of Israel by Cyrus of Persia, the old country would have been barely recognizable to a former inhabitant. Jerusalem was a shambles, Solomon’s magnificent temple, the fabled city walls where gaps now yawned sufficient to drive cattle through, the kings palace—all gone. The returning Jews had little sense of ownership, and while the writer of the books of Nehemiah and Ezra idealized a picture of the rebuilding of the wall and the city, all from the vantage point of two centuries later, the prophet Haggai paints with the intimacy of a contemporary. He accuses the governor and High Priest of being indolent in worship and self-centered in their new surroundings, living in paneled houses while God’s house lay in ruins. Haggai challenges the common people to get their minds off themselves, their poverty and hopelessness, and toward God in all things. Restore the temple, honor God, and that new alignment will usher in profound new blessings of wellbeing and security. But this will not happen because they are God’s favored people. It is promised as the outcome of their faithfulness.

The Christian climate of the world is rapidly changing. Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity in the global north has and continues to suffer great losses. One hundred years ago, 80 percent of Christians lived in Europe or North America. A century later two thirds of all active Christians live in the “developing

world” in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Western Christianity has lost its influence world wide and at home.

The vast majority of Protestant churches are hemorrhaging now, and many will ultimately die. Almost all have suffered significant losses in worship and membership since a new religious malaise crept over people after 2001. It has happened to a degree at St. John’s, but it does not have to continue. Many large independent churches appear to do well, but as a recent study has shown, the growth of super churches account for no more than 3% of the worshipping population in the U.S. God bless those who worship there, but these predominantly conservative churches seldom sustain the needs of progressive, thinking adults.

On this day, the World Communion Sunday, Christians globally gather about a common table. And at that table something profound yet deeply simple happens, which our mode of communion this Sunday underscores. It happened two millennia ago when Jesus prepared to feed the 5,000 on a Galilean hillside late in the day. The disciples came to him, anxious that the people had no bread and eager for him to resolve the problem. But Jesus didn’t resolve it directly. He asked the disciples how much food they had, and you recall they said 5 small barley loaves (the staple bread of the poor) and 2 fish, the offering of a child. “It is enough,” he said. “Now, *you* give them something to eat.” It was the disciples, not Jesus, who fed the multitude, inviting the people to sit in groups of 50 and 100. But here’s the real miracle. Like us this morning, the people only get fed when their neighbor passes the bread. No one gets fed unless each neighbor is willing to share in what they have. That’s startlingly simple. Yet to an astonishing degree in our churches it does not happen. Only as we *invite* other people to share in the fellowship of Christ does the church prosper. Nor are we promised success at every turn. Recall the parable of the sower (Mark 4) where, if you imagine equal proportions, 75% of the seed sown does not prosper. Still, the sower is faithful in the sowing. We are not called to be successful. God only asks us to be faithful. As virtually any one in sales will tell you, seldom more than one in five, even one in ten sales calls will bring a sale, but knowing this keeps the seller faithful to the task.

This is Haggai’s approach, pointing beyond the leadership of the faith community to the role of the people. That is where real transformation happens—from the pew.

This is not such a new thing that we face—being on the edge. It is in the nature of progress to have to remake ourselves time after time. Businesses have to do it frequently to stay in the cutting edge of the market. Families have to as the generations unfold. Our bodies remake themselves all the time, sloughing off worn out cells while growing and repairing other cells. In a lifetime we replace every cell in our body several times over. You are not the person you used to be, literally. The church, too, has to remake itself periodically.

Being on the edge is not a bad thing. It can be a bit scary, I'll admit, but the edge has two dimensions—one facing disaster, the other facing opportunity. One looking down, the other reaching for safety. One side is paralysis, the other leads to growth.

I've made my choice to set good things in place for us to prosper. I am not Haggai or Jesus, but I give you what I have—the same good word from the Lord that things can be very different. Everything good that the people long for can be restored. I will find the bread, with your help. By the way, “How much bread do we have?” I will find the bread, you invite others to share in it. You organize the circle of good fellowship. You find them a place to sit. “You give them something to eat.”

And “‘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.”

There are a lot of wandering souls out there, who've lost their sense of home. Hungry souls, who can't quite figure out how to get where they want to go. Anne LaMotte, in *Traveling Mercies* tells this story.

When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. the little girl ran up and down the streets of the town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, “You can let me go now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.”

And that is why I stay so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and I hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.

Amen.