

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
November 7, 2010
Anita Rediger

“Building Time”

Tanya (thanks for reading from this tongue-twisting OT text!) just read for us, “In the second year of King Darius (521 BCE), in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying...”Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?”

It had just been a short two months since an earlier word of the Lord had come to Haggai, the prophet farmer of Judah. The Lord reports to Haggai, “These people say the *time* has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house” and in the very next ‘breath’ the Lord adds a zinging question something like this: “Well then, if it isn’t *time* for you to rebuild the Lord’s house, what *time* is it? Is it *time* for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? OUCH!

I don’t know that I’ve ever read from the book of Haggai. At Swiss Village this week, we discussed this text and I was rather relieved to hear that several of those whom I consider biblically literate folks didn’t think that they had ever read it either! And they are in their 90’s! When I saw that this was the assigned OT text for this week, it caught my eye. I thought, rather dismayed, I don’t know anything about Haggai! Upon seeing that Haggai has all of two chapters, I started reading from the top!

I was taken by surprise by the circumstances just described. (That is one advantage of reading something for the first time ☺). I had started my reading innocently. The people hadn’t felt it was the right time to begin rebuilding the temple. Sure! I could understand. They’ve been in exile for two generations. They’ve traveled across some difficult geography to return to Judah. They’ve had to figure out their place in and among the folks who had never gone to Babylon...no wonder they didn’t feel it was time to rebuild the temple. They needed a little more time!

However, my sympathetic reading was quickly jarred by the Lord’s “next statement.” God’s description of the people living in paneled homes knocked the props out of the “refugee camp” life-style that I had been pictured for them. And, with a little more reading, I discovered that the exiles hadn’t returned “just yesterday.” It is now the second year of the reign of King Darius - nearly *20 years* since the first people had returned to Jerusalem. They’ve been “home” again nearly 1/2 as long as they had been in exile in Babylon!

Yet, the people had been putting off the rebuilding of the temple – the reason? It just wasn’t the *right time*. Something must have always “come up.” No doubt they had good intentions, but... How well I know how that goes! However, into their settled lives, Haggai speaks the word of the Lord, “**now** is the *time* to get to work...rebuild the house of God! It was with this mandate that Cyrus had released them... It had been in the first

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year of King Cyrus of Persia (539 BCE) that his spirit had been stirred up by the Lord. Cyrus had sent a herald throughout all his kingdom declaring, “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.

Any of those among you who are of his people... go up to Jerusalem in Judah and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel.” (Ezra) The people had returned from exile precisely to rebuild God’s “house.” And this “house” was much more than simply a lovely building; it was their meeting place with God! If the people were to be “a people,” it was high time that they pay attention to the symbol of their people hood – the temple!

Today’s text describes for us what has transpired in the two short months. Rebuilding is underway, but the task seems overwhelming. The word of the Lord comes once again to Haggai, this time to encourage and to comfort. “Those of you who were young when you were carried off into exile must feel heartbroken at the sight of this project, but don’t give up, I’m not finished with you or the work that we’ll be doing together. Take courage, I am with you, remember I am the one who led you out of Egypt...don’t forget the stories of my faithfulness to you!” In order for the people to remember these stories, to have a place to retell and reclaim they needed to rebuild the “house of the Lord!” Without the place, without worship, their identity as a people would continue to disintegrate. If we would continue our reading we would discover that it wasn’t only the physical building that lay in ruins but also the people’s understanding of the Law – read more about this in the books of Ezra & Nehemiah! For the people of Israel, the Temple was symbol of their allegiance – to the God, the maker of heaven and earth, in contrast to any other god. Haggai gives us a window into the world of a people who are drifting away from their center. The salvation story was slipping away and they are beckoned to faithfulness once again.

Last week, we retraced other “times” in the life of the people – throughout history the thread of the Salvation History of God meanders like a Great Plains river: re: The Frenchman

1. We noted that last Sunday was Reformation Day. (1517) Martin Luther proclaimed the authority of scripture over the authority of the Church. Martin Luther spoke in his time...
2. Our ancestors of faith– of the Radical reformation - in their time- (1525), sought to revitalize the Salvation story – challenging even those who had been calling for reform. They sought to reclaim the story for the entire community – lay and ordained persons alike – to be a people whose foundation is living in the way of Jesus.
3. And the generations continue...now, it is our opportunity to pay attention to the “times.” (Re-tell ERMF story of that which had been “gestating” for a long time, but three years ago was birthed.) It was the “right” time!

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In our time, we've been released to reexamine our call to be a community of grace, joy and peace so that God's healing and hope may flow through us to the world. Together, we support one another to give our primary allegiance to Jesus in contrast to our nation, class or even "fixed, nonnegotiable doctrinal principles." John Roth, *Beliefs*, p.127

In our times, we've been given the story of ERMF. I'm becoming more and more aware that being part of this faith community is going to be one of the most important aspects of my personal salvation story. When I'm a very old woman, I will want to retell the story of the birth of this Fellowship! ...and by that time there will be much more, too...!

Nodal story:

- David's call to me on that September afternoon: I knew that there would be no going back. And I'm grateful...
- Our church fellowship – so central to my identity...my heart leaps when I see any of you...
 - Recently Alex at SV when the seniors came for a work day.
 - Joel coming across the barnyard
 - Andy – just this last Thursday afternoon from the paper towel aisle of Wal-Mart
 - Bernie – when I saw him dictating notes in the work room in the Sonnenblum nursing area at SV.
 - David and Jim watching the extension lift last week
 - Jan watching us drive away from worship planning from her porch...
 - Karen sharing a cup of coffee with her mother in health care...

O dear ones, we've been given an incredible gift...and look at the surprises that continue...

- Connections with young adults like Andy Lehman at work at BU
- An ever growing scholarship fund for our young college people
- Peter & Jenna in Ireland...already!
- The knitting and weaving of our lives together...already how we treasure the weekly beauty shared by Pam & Dorothy...
- The "safety" Jan, Marie & I feel piano playing when Melissa is away...
- The tenderness which is present as we share weekly at the Lord's Table...
- Our sense of belonging...and a deep desire to share this place of grace, joy and peace with others. As guests come, I'm nearly always treated to hear of their experience among us...a sense of powerful connection and care; deep joy...

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Are these not the “earth-shaking,” “soul-shaping” experiences that God promises?

And all of this pure gift... we didn't sit down to decide to do these things...all of this has come to us as opportunity, as gift.

The account this morning of the people of 2500 years ago invites us to consider our future. The people of that day had taken great risk in leaving familiar surroundings to participate in the reconstruction of the temple. More importantly, they were going to rebuild the community of faith. Yet, soon after they got “settled in” to their new surroundings they began to lose sight of their initial intentions.

We've been released – like our more recent ancestors, also – to do a new thing. Perhaps it involved getting in sailing ships in the 1850's or steamers in the 1920's. Perhaps, in the 1940's it meant working in a mental hospital instead of being a soldier.

As we look to the lives of one another – right here, right now we see decisions that were made, in order to participate with the Spirit in doing unthinkably bold things...like seeking out a Mennonite congregation as a retired Air Force Captain...like joining a new congregation when in ones 80's...like choosing to focus on the decision of a conscientious objector for a major junior project when the assignment given was to focus on the life of a person who was a veteran in one of the military branches of service...to see beyond the customary boundaries of gender, welcoming women to serve in all ways in the church...even as the pastor!

By the leading of the Spirit, we've been released to build the community of faith known as ERMF. We seek to be an authentic community, not simply a community built around a common baseball or football team – even though that has its place, too! As ones who belong to ERMF, we seek to build a community of faith - grounded and centered in the ongoing resurrection story of Jesus.

What will we do with this freedom? How can we help one another stay alert to the natural tendencies that we all have to drift away into self-serving ways of individualism? As time passes, how will we balance our personal lives with our investment/commitment to the community of faith? At this time, we don't understand our call to include the construction of a fine building (were you afraid what this sermon title might mean!?) Rather, we seek to build a community of faith as we create opportunity for meaningful worship; as we nurture study and tender fellowship “The God who made the world and everything in it...does not live in shrines made by human hands.” (Acts 17:24) We may not be called to build a temple, but we are called to kingdom building – one made with hands of service laid on “no other foundation other than the one that has already been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor.3:11)

And as we build...

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“God reminds us through Haggai of two realities that are timely in any congregation at any hour. First, we are not in this alone. We do not need to be responsible for all of the resources needed to build the kingdom of heaven, for God is a God of abundance who “will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land and all the nations.” The promises of God are promises of abundance in the past, in the present, and in the future. Second, the move into the future is not just a repeat of the past and a faint echo of former glory. In God’s future we are moving toward and co-creating a surge of wonder, grace, beauty and love...that which is to come even greater than the glory of the past...”

-Martha Sterne

Associate Rector, Holy Innocents’ Episcopal, Atlanta, GA

As our future unfolds, may we continue to welcome God’s leading...in whatever surprising ways it *will* continue to beckon to us! AMEN