

"Treasures of the Nations":  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for November 10<sup>th</sup> 2019 (22<sup>nd</sup> after Pentecost/Remembrance Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Haggai 2: 1-9

It is not at all difficult to date...

...not at all difficult to date the book of the prophet Haggai which, is to say: it is not at all difficult to date the four prophecies which comprise this short, two-chapter, prophetic book: four prophecies offered over a roughly 3-month period some 520 years before the birth of Christ.

And this was not, I hasten to add, an especially happy time in the life of Ancient Israel. Recall that less than 60 years earlier, the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. Recall that less than 20 years earlier, the Persians—having conquered Babylon—permitted the Jewish exiles (languishing in Babylon) to return to their city. Finally: recall that the Persian King Darius the Great had now given permission for the Jewish people to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple which—at the time of Haggai's prophecies—still lay in ruins. And so Haggai—along with his fellow prophet Zechariah—undertakes to motivate the people, especially its leadership: above all, the governor of Judah, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, as well as the High Priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. The prophet pointedly asks them: why have you rebuilt **your** houses but you have not rebuilt **God's** house, the Temple? And then...having laid that far from subtle guilt-trip on them...

Haggai proceeds to issue an extravagant series of promises: the promises we heard this morning, in a reading of what is the second of Haggai's four prophecies, words which ring down through the ages:

*Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord.  
Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, <sup>5</sup>  
according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.  
My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. <sup>6</sup>  
For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while,  
I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. <sup>7</sup>  
And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in,  
and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>8</sup>  
The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.  
<sup>9</sup> The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts.  
And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts."*

And yes, like the man said: beautiful words, words which do ring down through the ages. And yet, if truth be told, words which ring with no shortage of ironies raised, and questions that most surely must be asked.

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Go no further...go no further than the assurance that the “**latter** glory of this house”—the glory, in short, of the Temple once it has been rebuilt—will be even greater than that of the former house. But the former house was the house—the magnificent Temple—built by Solomon, when ancient Israel had achieved for an achingly brief time, a place of political and military prominence in the ancient Near East. In actual fact, the Temple that would eventually take its place thanks—in part—to the persistent goading of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah...

...in actual fact the Temple that would rise from the ashes, in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile, would pale in comparison with the Temple built by Solomon. And so it remained—I hasten to add—for the better part of five centuries. It was only during the reign of Herod the Great...the Herod who sat on the throne at the time Jesus was born...

...it was only during the time of Herod, that the Temple was actually restored to a state that might be described as grand. Indeed: if you have ever been in the city of Jerusalem, in the precinct of the Temple, the remnants of the Temple such as the Wailing Wall, are all to be dated not from the grand Temple built by Solomon, and not from the rather sad shadow of a Temple Haggai helped to see rebuilt, but from the Temple Herod rebuilt 500 years later. But, of course, that is the very Temple which was destroyed less than 100 years after Herod’s reconstruction project: this time not by Babylon, but by the new Babylon: Rome. In light of the history that follows Haggai’s brave words, it is hard to escape the impression that we still await their true fulfillment. That certainly seems to be the case where the Temple is concerned...and it is most certainly the case vis a vis the final promise with which Haggai’s prophecy concludes: *and in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.*

God help us...God help us. But surely...surely if there is any place on this planet where peace seems an impossibly distant dream, that place is located right there on the Temple Mount. Presently home to one of the most important Mosques in the Islamic world, a Mosque of which many things can rightly be said—including its great beauty—but a Mosque which serves as a continual reminder of the stubborn obstacles which stand in the way of the dream peace in that place...let alone the dream of peace in all places.

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I was struck a number of weeks ago when I first began to ponder this morning’s time of worship...

...I was struck by one phrase from Haggai, that truly jumped out at me. My sermon title, this morning, is something of a dead-giveaway in terms of the phrase I have in mind.

*I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. 7  
And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in,  
and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. 8*

And it needs to be said that Haggai—when he speaks those words to the people of Jerusalem—appears to have had a definite idea in mind as to what he meant when he spoke of the “treasures of the nations.” He leaves us in no doubt on that count, since—with his next breath—he proclaims with not a hint of ambiguity: *The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts.* That, quite simply, is that sort of treasure Haggai anticipates filling the rebuilt Temple, just as that sort of treasure had filled the Temple built by Solomon.

But, you know: I cannot help...I cannot help but read this particular promise (as I tend to read all of the Old Testament promises) through a decidedly New Testament lens. And yes: read through a New Testament lens...

...which is to say, read through the lens of the Jesus who healed not only the daughter of the decidedly Jewish ruler of the Synagogue, but who **also** healed the close friend of the decidedly Gentile Roman Centurion...

...read through the lens provided by that Jesus but also the lens provided by Saul of Tarsus—a.k.a. Paul of Damascus—with his insistence that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile...

Well: suffice it to say that when I hear Haggai’s promise...

...when I hear of God’s promised “shaking of the nations” so that the “treasures of all nations shall come in...”, I am afraid I am left with no choice—as a Jewish follower of Jesus—but to presume that the treasure to which Haggai is referring (whether or not he knew this at the time)...is you folks...and those from every nation, from every clan and tribe and race, who—through God’s righteous emissary, the one we call Jesus—have claimed their stake in the heritage of Ancient Israel. The heritage of those truly treasured...treasured...in and through the eyes of the Holy God...the righteous God, the God of love and yes...the God of peace who still promises—as once promised through the prophet Haggai...a time of peace...indeed, an eternity of peace. Oh Lord...how long? Oh Lord...how long?

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I need to acknowledge...need to ‘fess up...that when Remembrance Day rolls around each November 11<sup>th</sup>, there is this tiny part of me that wonders whether my life, on this day, would be made more straightforward were I a pacifist: in other words, were I utterly and absolutely opposed to all war, under any and every set of circumstance. Were that the case, I suppose—as someone who hates to irritate people, especially people of whom he is fond...

...were that the case, I would probably find a way to schedule a holiday for early November year-in and year-out, so that I would never need to be here on the Sunday closest to November 11<sup>th</sup>. Oh yes: I would still try to remember in my own way those who served including, of course, my own father: but what I would not need to do is find a meaningful word to speak on this most dread and solemn of occasions.

If truth be told, however...

...if truth be told, the pacifist position is not the one I hold since, in addition to those wars which might have been better not fought, there were those which—alas—needed to be fought...and I therefore have no choice but to be grateful for those who served in defence not only of those high-and-mighty ideals and abstract principles we hold dear...

...but in certain conflicts, served in defence of basic decency, laying down their lives to stop those who would have stripped innocent others not only of their human dignity but of life itself. And yet...and yet...

To remember...and, indeed, in a very real sense to “celebrate”...heroism displayed, sacrifices made, victories achieved against the backdrop of lives shattered in many cases beyond repair...

...to remember and to honour, to acknowledge and yes to “celebrate” as a Christian, as a follower of Christ’s—is surely to do so as someone who has no choice but to realize that it is God’s treasured people from all nations and every nation who are defiled with the outbreak of war. What does it mean **as a disciple**...to pray for peace, but to acknowledge that not every war can be skirted? What does it mean **as a disciple**...to face off against an enemy, certain that the one whose life I am about to take, is and remains God’s creation, a child of God? And yes: how does someone—who has participated in war (as some of you have participated in war)...not as a bystander...not merely as a passive-victim...but as an actor in war...a protagonist in war...how does such a one live with the knowledge that they have in all likelihood, in the process of protecting human decency, in the process of defending a righteous cause, in the process of standing in opposition to evil, found themselves taking the life of an other?

And you know: just as there is this small part of me that wonders whether my life would be more straightforward were I a pacifist...there’s also this small part of me that cannot avoid noting how much more complicated our lives have become, as a result of Jesus having called on us to love our enemies...at a bare minimum praying for those enemies...and learning to regard them as fully human....learning to regard them, in every conceivable sense, as child of God. I gather that one of the many things Adolf Hitler loathed about Christianity was that he thought it provided a very poor religious foundation for a warrior. And Hitler, whatever else he stood for, stood for the creation of a race of warriors: warriors so soaked in their own rightness, that they would never be

shadowed by doubt, by regret, by what-ifs, by anything other than contempt for the vanquished.

Which is why, oddly enough, I find myself giving thanks—on this shadowed occasion...this holy time of remembrance and reflection...

...why I find myself giving thanks for the things of this world and, in particular, the things of our faith...that cause us to draw back from our righteous certitudes and yes: which cause us to name all of the ambivalent places where we see something of ourselves in those we have no choice but to oppose...those mottled places where we have no choice but to see through God's eyes: to see and to recognize and to acknowledge the human treasures who, for a season, have become our foes. Leaving no choice but to pray that at the end of time, **all** of those rich and vibrant Haggai promises will be fulfilled. That the treasures of each and every nation will find their way home. Above all...: that *in this place* (and—of course—in **every** place as promised by the prophet: *God will give peace...the Holy One will give peace.*

May it be so! Thanks be to God!