

2500 Years...and Counting!
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 6th 2016 (25th after Pentecost/Remembrance Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Haggai 2: 1-9

Those of you...those of you who were worshipping here at Trinity for all or even for only a portion of our nine consecutive Sunday reflections upon the life and times of the prophet Jeremiah...

...assuming you have not chosen to blot the entire experience out of your memory!...

...those of you who were present for at least a portion of our journey with Jeremiah, will likely recall the incident that gives to Jeremiah's writings their central focus, namely the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its Temple some 585 years before the birth of Christ. At that point, many of those Judeans who managed to survive the destruction joined their fellow-Jews who ten years earlier became exiles in the city of Babylon. Others of the survivors would have stayed behind in the fallen city, and still others—Jeremiah amongst them—ended up in Egypt. The point, however, is that Jeremiah—from an early stage in his prophetic ministry—appears to have anticipated that day of horror, and the fate that would befall his beloved city and his beloved people.

Well. Take that as preface to this morning's reading, which plants us down the road, so to speak: roughly 50 years later, on the far side of Jerusalem's destruction, in the company of a prophet charged with the responsibility of speaking God's word to the subsequent generation, the generation which having returned to a destroyed city and a destroyed Temple, now faced the steep task of restoring that which had fallen. And it is perhaps not surprising—human nature being what it is—perhaps not surprising (and perhaps not entirely inappropriate) that the returnees from exile began by picking up the pieces of their own personal lives. Building houses for themselves and their families, cultivating agricultural land for themselves and their community. None of that ought to surprise us and none of that ought to be regarded as a scandal. Nevertheless, 15 to 20 years later—when the work of rebuilding the Temple was still not even begun—God sent a prophet, a man named Haggai, whose basic task was to encourage both the religious and the political leadership to get on with the work. To paraphrase one of the candidates in Tuesday's U.S. election: Haggai's job was to encourage the people and their leaders, to make Jerusalem great again!

In that context of discouragement—the context of a people who returned to Judea with such longing and expectation, but who by now had discovered that there really is a sense in which you “cannot go home again”...

...in such a context it is not surprising that Haggai is called to speak an encouraging word. And yes: the promises he makes get quite grandiose! It is not enough for him to promise that the Temple will once again stand proudly on Mount Zion! Haggai goes further, promising that Israel's God will shake the heavens and the earth, causing the nations to bring their glory to Jerusalem, causing the rebuilt Temple to be even more magnificent than Solomon's, eventually leading to a time of peace that will begin on this holy mountain, but whose reach will not be limited to that sacred place. Such is the promise...such is the promise Haggai speaks to the Jewish people upon their return to their home and native land. And such is the promise placed before you and me, this morning: some 2500 years down the line.

And yes: it goes without saying, though it ought to be said. So extravagant a promise—some 2500 years down the line—has yet to be entirely fulfilled. Those of you familiar with the melancholy period in the history of ancient Israel that followed their return from Babylon will be aware that the Temple these returnees eventually built was not nearly as grand as Solomon's. Ironically, the Temple that did approach the splendour of Solomon's was the one King Herod would eventually build: a magnificent structure quickly destroyed by the Romans a few short decades after the death of Jesus. That Temple, of course, remains in the ruins, other than its Western Wall, the so-called Weeping Wall. While it is entirely possible for Jews to see Haggai's promises fulfilled in the establishment of the State of Israel, while it is no less possible for Christians to see Haggai's prophecies fulfilled in the arrival of the nations to worship Christ, and while Muslims might well see those prophecies fulfilled in the Al Aqsa mosque that now stands on Mount Zion, what is abundantly clear—2500 years and counting later!!—is the absence of peace. No peace for Jerusalem! No peace for our broken world! Neither peace...nor even credible rumours of peace...as we Canadians prepare, once again, to commemorate the end of a war which—at the time—was regarded in some quarters as the war to end all wars. Alas: that too has proven itself to be an elusive promise.

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I must confess...I must confess that I always have a sense of unease when November 11th appears on the horizon: a sense of unease not because I regard Remembrance Sunday as an inappropriate observance in the life of the Christian Church...but because I am especially sensitive to the fact that I have not personally experienced war. Read about it? For sure! Seen photos? Absolutely! Films, documentaries, TV specials? Of course! Sat at the feet of those who have, themselves, been in the midst of war, either as civilians or combatants: yes, and always a privilege! And yet: what all of that second hand reportage has taught me, is that most people find it nearly impossible to express their experience...their first hand experience of war.

A couple of weeks ago, Reverend Fred and I were chatting. We were speaking about Remembrance Day, and the challenges it poses. He spoke of his brother-in-law, who fought in the Second World War. Upon his return to Canada, this young man tried to jump back into the life he had previously led, including teaching Sunday School. It wasn't long before he announced that he would have no choice but to step down as a Sunday School teacher. Why? "I can no longer talk to the children about God." I trust none of us here, this morning, will be so bold as to stand in judgement of that man, not least those, like myself, who have not personally participated in war. There are some things, once you have seen them, that you simply cannot un-see. And there are some things that you simply cannot forget—perhaps ought not to forget—once you have been a part of them. War has that effect on those whose lives are directly touched by its fierce power.

A few days after my conversation with Reverend Fred, I was speaking to our Church Administrator, Sarah. We too were speaking about war and its destructive force. I said to Sarah: "Growing up in England, as you did, you must have heard plenty from the older generation about their experience during the Second World War." She responded: "You could never really get them to talk about it." That brought back memories of my own father, who fought in North Africa and Italy. He had some funny stories about the war; it wasn't hard to get him to share those memories. It was all but impossible, however, for my brother or I to get him to open-up about the other side—the brutal side—of his experience. My hunch is that he was quite typical in that regard. It isn't easy to come to terms with the memory of fallen comrades and no, it isn't easy coming to terms with the fact that war led you to do things you might otherwise never have imagined yourself doing, above all killing the enemy. Those of us who haven't been there should not pretend that we know—that we truly know in our bones—what such an experience is like...how the lingering memories of such an experience could and likely would haunt a person for all their days.

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Some of you may have noticed, in the welcome note I placed in this morning's insert, my sense that it is especially fitting—on such a morning as this—especially fitting for us to bring our worship to a close at this table. I say that, in part, because this table—for me—is a place of unbridled, unqualified hope. To gather here, on a Sunday morning, is to gather at a Table which radiantly points to the reality of Christ's resurrection: this table where neither you nor I but only the risen Christ serves as host. As a matter of fact...

...as a matter of fact, I believe that one of the truly positive developments in the life of the Protestant churches during our lifetimes, has been the way in which the more upbeat dimensions of the sacrament of Holy Communion have come into sharper focus. Many of you...perhaps most of you...will recall a time when Communion was celebrated in a highly penitential way, not merely during Lent but whenever it was offered: so penitential that even

describing what happened here as a “celebration” may be something of a distortion. In truth, so aware were we of the sacrificial nature of Christ’s death on Good Friday and its connection to Communion that the no less important link between Communion and Easter Sunday’s empty-tomb was all but lost. No wonder most Protestant Churches tended to offer the sacrament but four times a year. Given how grim our way of regarding what happens at this table, it’s a miracle we were willing to come even that frequently. Whatever shortcomings our present approach contains—and there will be shortcomings with anything and everything we undertake as Christians—whatever shortcomings our present approach contains, at least it is a way of celebrating the sacrament that never loses sight of the miracle of Easter, never loses sight of the profound truth at the heart of our faith, namely that Jesus Christ is risen today, and that he beckons each of us and all of us, to a future bright with God’s own radiance, filled with God’s determination to provide us eternally with food and drink fit for royalty. Thank God for that! And yet!

Some 2500 years after the prophet Haggai...2500 years and still counting...some 25 centuries after Haggai spoke of the promise of peace, that peace remains a distant dream even for the one city of Jerusalem let alone for the whole of God’s good earth...

...with such peace out of reach let alone outside our grasp, much as I wish for us to never lose sight of the hopeful **promise** that is ours in and through the risen Christ...the **promised** hope that is ours in the breaking of this bread and the sharing of this cup...

...perhaps...perhaps...today is one occasion when it behoves us to take, in all seriousness, the sombre side of what it means to come to this table: a table from which we are able to measure the full extent of the self-offering God made by coming to us in Jesus Christ. Prior to any hope we may derive from our place at this table, surely what makes such hope credible is the realization that this our God—in the fullness of time—did not choose to remain aloof in a stance of distant, smug superiority...

...but chose to enter fully this war-torn earthly realm...taking flesh...not merely embracing but participating fully in the blood, sweat and tears that is our inescapable lot as human beings. Participating fully...and in the process...putting into full motion, the solemn work of healing us, changing us, transfiguring us and yes—at this table—nurturing us. With finest wheat...and sweetest cup! That we who have known no end to wars and rumours of war, might continue to know that even in the midst of the fiercest conflict and the bleakest chaos, we are not alone. The divine peace we await is already in our midst. His name is Jesus...and he is here for you...he is here for me...he is here for us all.

May be it be so! In Jesus’ name! Amen!!