

St. Paul's –Halifax – November 11, 2007

“The only dream that lives”

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Today is Remembrance Day. It's a day where we are called to remember those men and women who sacrificed and continue to sacrifice their lives for the visions and hopes of a better future. It is also the day that Jesus calls us to remember that our God is God “not of the dead but of the living for to him all of them are alive.”

Our reading from the prophet Haggai is from a particular moment in history, a few months of time, but it speaks from a perspective that is timeless. It is from the perspective of the losers in a conflict of visions. Some 70 years earlier, following the war with Babylon, the Temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed, and the Israelites had been exiled. With the overthrow of the Babylonians by the Persians, they were allowed to return home, and a small number had returned, but to a city in ruins. The exiles had been back in Jerusalem for some twenty years but had not yet begun to rebuild the Temple. It is to these people at this time that Haggai says, “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.” (Haggai 1:3-4).

Haggai understood that this broken community needed a center, something that would hold fast and provide a focus in the face of changing history. He encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple as the visible symbol of what God had done for the community. The rebuilt Temple would be a symbol of God's grace in even allowing this community to survive the exile, and of God's grace in again choosing to make his presence known among them. The heart of the book, and especially this reading, affirms a strong faith in God and his work in the world. It exhibits a willingness to work for a long-range goal, a goal that lies beyond what we can see at the moment. It represents a willingness to take the promises of God in hand and to act. For the Israelites it was a call to put stone upon stone, to rebuild the Temple and work toward a new vision, a new future, a future where God will "fill this house with splendour," a splendour that will be "greater than the former [splendour]."

Haggai was willing to dream God's dream and to work at making that dream a reality. He was willing to look beyond the present dismal circumstances and see what could be, willing to look beyond the present failures toward a future based on God's action in the world. It turns out that Haggai's vision was not exactly right in all the detail, Zerubbabel does not become the new Davidic king, but the temple was rebuilt and history tells us that the Israelites did rebuild and continue as a nation.

It's not the details of Haggai's vision that should concern us; it's the fact that he had a vision of a better future in the midst of circumstances that could easily have led to despair. It's not the specifics of rebuilding the Temple or what will happen

after this is accomplished that should concern us, but the willingness and strength of character to act in the face of all adversity through faith in God. Haggai did not wait until the Temple was completed; he blessed and consecrated its foundations! He recognized that even in starting, in laying the foundation stones of the new Temple over the ruins of the old Temple, there was a concrete expression of faith that allowed the people to see God in their midst's, to begin building towards a new and better future.

This is the timeless message that Haggai gives us, the message of hope. It is the message that will encourage us to rebuild from the ruins of our own conflicts. It is a message for nations and for individuals alike. It is the message that even in the midst of ruins and brokenness, faith in God and action through that faith can lead to a new and better future. It is the message that can allow nation to rebuild from the destructions of war. It is the message that can allow soldiers who return from war, broken in body, mind or spirit, to reimagine and reshape their lives. It is the message that allows the families of those who do not return, or the families who themselves return to the ruins of their former lives, to imagine and build toward a new future. Although the visions of these futures may not be clear and working toward them may be difficult, our hope lies in being willing to dream at all. In being open to God's vision, in the willingness to believe that by God's presence and spirit at work in our midst's that what **might** be actually can be, to put stone upon stone and to begin to build the foundations of those dreams, of those visions of the future.

Hundreds of years after Haggai' time, it was Jesus who continued to speak this message. He spoke of hope in the midst of despair. He spoke hope to those who sat in the midst of ruins, the sick, the outcasts, and the oppressed, to those who could not or would not see a way to a better future. He spoke of acting in faith to love God and neighbour as a way to a fulfilling life here on earth. By the example of his life he gave us the means to act and build lives of faith and love, which lead to a fulfilling future for all humanity.

He also gave us a vision of an ultimate future. A future at the end of our earthly lives when we are resurrected as spiritual beings. I can understand our Jewish brothers the Sadducees when they asked him what turns out to be an absurd question. They ask which of the seven brothers the woman will be married to in heaven. Jesus points out that in this future those questions have no meaning, that in this future we will be "like angels" and "children of God", in other words we will become wholly different, so different that our limited and earthly concepts no longer apply. Jesus does not discount our earthly lives, he says, "Now he is God not of the dead but of the living for to him all of them all are alive. This was and remains a difficult concept for us to comprehend and can only be approached through faith that it is so.

So we have here two prophetic visions on this day of remembrance; Haggai and his vision of the rebuilding of temple in a time of despair leading to a new and better future for the Israelites, and Jesus ultimate vision of the resurrection. Both require of us the faith to dream God's dreams and to act in that faith and live into those dreams. I believe that without the faith to dream these dreams we would be

in danger of sitting on the ruins of the Temple forever unable to go forward from times of despair and hopelessness. I believe that through faith in this God, this God not of the dead but of the living lays our hope both in this life and in the life to come. Ann Weems the modern Christian poet will get the last word.

Sometimes the pages won't turn

in our book of dreams,

and we are left clinging to a life

we never lived...

just wanted to.

Stuck in the stark reality

of unlived dreams,

we sniffle and tread water,

or we go in search

of the Holy One

who will wipe the tears

from our eyes

and offer to us

the only dream

that lives<sup>1</sup>.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Weems, Ann. "Our dreams" in "Kneeling in Jerusalem" (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, Kentucky 1992) page 58

