

Living & Abiding

A Sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
November 11, 2007

In case the passage on which I preached last Sunday, Habakkuk, was not obscure enough, today we turn to Haggai. I laugh when I hear Haggai, because I hear the word haggis. You know, the traditional Scottish dish consisting in sheep's intestines and the like. Haggai has nothing to do with haggis, but my mind goes there. Haggai. Just two books apart, only Zephaniah exists between Habakkuk and Haggai. Yet, the whole world has changed in between one book and the other.

Habakkuk, you remember, was speaking to those in Jerusalem as they noticed the dark cloud of "Mordor" coming over them. Things were not heading in a good direction. Threat was all around. Anxiety ruled the day, and for good reason. The temple was destroyed. The people were all dragged away. Their riches were plundered, and they lived, as if they were no people, in a foreign land.

Haggai was among the first to have returned to that former place. What did he find there? Destruction. If you can even allow yourself to think it, imagine something horrible happening to this sanctuary. How beloved this place is to us. Now imagine a storm or a war or an earthquake leveling this it. Perhaps there is a piece of a column left. Perhaps a portion of the roof. Perhaps you steep down and find one little sliver of stained glass, but the rest has all been demolished and carried away.

It was to people surveying such a scene that Haggai was speaking. His main message to them was, "Take courage." It took a lot of courage for Haggai to say that to them in that moment. Again, imagine you are standing in the shell of a building, and someone says, "Take courage." Why should I? How do I know that we will have the resolve, the motivation, and the resources to build up this place into something that is even a shadow of what it was before? But Haggai does indeed say, "Take courage." And he says, "Take courage" to the governor, to the high priest, and to *all* of the people. "This is something we cannot do, unless we do it together."

Haggai reminds the people and the governor and the high priest of the promise that was made when their ancestors passed through the Red Sea out of Egypt. It was at that time that God made a promise to the people: "I will bring you into a land that is flowing with milk and honey." In other words, into a land with everything you possibly need. And while they

Living & Abiding
November 11, 2007

stammered and clamored and wandered around in the wilderness, it did come to fruition that the people were given the land they were promised, and there they flourished for a time.

Now, all that has been taken away, and Haggai has to remind them that God is still God, the God of all time and all ages, and that God's promise endures today in this bombed out shell of a temple.

And then, uttering God-words, Haggai says, "My spirit abides among you. Do not fear." You can imagine what those who heard it, standing in that place at that time, sensed. "Long ago, we knew God's presence when we were together in this place. We sat with one another and shared the stories of God. We passed the peace. Our pews were full. When our children covered the chancel, we knew God's presence then. But now — now, a harsh wind blows through this building, if you can even call it a building. Now, we just don't know."

Haggai speaks to their doubt: "My spirit abides among you. Do not fear." That phrase, "do not fear," is peppered throughout the entire Bible. Parents, if you teach your children nothing else in the entire Bible, point them to all of the places where it says, "Do not fear." If there is no other message they get, may they know that in this book, in these stories, the stories of our ancestors, is a repeated tome, "Do not fear."
"Your temple has been torn down; do not fear."
"I'm not sure where my life is going." "Do not fear."
"I don't understand any of this." "Do not fear."
"My relationships are falling apart." "Do not fear."
"Do not fear. Do not fear, for my spirit abides among you."

Perhaps they began to take courage, began to trust that perhaps God's spirit could be felt in that place again. But the odds are so stacked against them. You can hear them: "We are just a poor people. We've been in exile for years and years. Many of those who remembered the former glory are now gone. How are we going to motivate each other to create a temple like the one that we had?"

And into that question Haggai speaks these words, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. I will shake everything." Walter Brueggemann, commenting on this verse, says that "God will shake the world order." Just when you thought things were fixed, just when you thought the story over, just when you

thought that everybody had taken their settled place in the society, everybody had figured out their role, God shakes up the world order. That is all fine and good. But when will this happen?

In so many places throughout the prophetic writings, there are words like these: “Once again, mind you, and it is not too far off, in a little while, I am going to shake things up.” Has that happened in your life? Have you ever thought that you were pretty much set in your ways, that things are heading in a certain direction, and then your life gets shaken up, for better and for worse?

This happens in our lives. It happens in the lives of individuals, of congregations, and in the life of the world around us. The God who abides, abides actively and intentionally. In the good *and* in the bad, we discern that God is moving, and moving, ultimately, we hope and we pray, for the better of all. And that hope requires a huge leap of faith.

A huge leap of faith that, for example, the economy would be directed towards justice. And those are the words that Haggai shares next. God then claims, “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine.” So you might think that everything is set, that the people who have and the people who have not are always going to be that way. God reminds, “The silver is mine. The gold is mine. They are on loan to you to share with one another.” And when they are not shared, the living and the abiding God breaks in, shakes up the world order, and redistributes.

God does this, not for the purpose of creating another elite, not for the purpose of saying, “Well, you had it for awhile; now you’re on the bottom. And these who didn’t have it, now you’re on the top again.” But rather for the purpose of the last word, the last verse in today’s passage. For the purpose of “Shalom.”

In the New Revised Standard Version, the word is translated “prosperity.” This is only half of the Hebrew meaning. Shalom means prosperity *and* peace. The understanding is that one cannot exist without the other. There is no true prosperity without peace. People cannot know peace, unless they know a *shared* prosperity.

So the temple shall be the place of Shalom, not just *in* that place but always emanating *from* it, a place that claims that God’s will for the world is both prosperity for all and a shared peace among all people.

Can we become a place of Shalom? I believe that in many ways our church serves a place of Shalom for many.

This last five weeks have been our stewardship campaign, and I hope you noticed that the stewardship committee tried to make it about a lot more than money. We chose as our message “claim and proclaim abundant life.” And we chose as our image a young girl She is standing on a fallen log in the middle of a creek, and she is raising her hands towards the heavens.

That was the posture we wanted to affect, as we went through these last five weeks. We have been seeking over the last couple years to create a culture change in our congregation when it comes to money. In a word, we wanted to become less anxious about the numbers.

You will recall, a few years ago, we pledged to a budget. We knew that we had a budget. We had the pledge to try to meet that budget, and if we did not, well, then we would have to make some cuts. Well, a year ago, and continuing this year, we said, “Let’s try to pledge out of a sense of joy. Out of a sense of a realization of God’s generosity, and let’s let go of the numbers.”

I am sure some of you, either in this church or in another church, have heard a celebration Sunday message that was something to these effect, “Well, we’ve come to celebrate, but we’re not quite there yet. You see, we needed to make this much, and we’ve only made this much, so if you would please give more, then we can eventually celebrate.”

We wanted to shift that. Could we actually, as a congregation, trust that the final number was not important, that the process of realizing God’s generosity in our lives and in our church gave us enough to celebrate? That *that* was enough.

Isn’t that what all of us want to hear anyway, ultimately? That you are enough. That you gave enough. That you did enough. You are enough. And we can celebrate that because we believe in a God who believes that about us already. We cannot earn God’s love. It is already there. We are already enough. Our giving does not come out of an obligation or a duty, but out of a realization of our enoughness – right now.

Living & Abiding
November 11, 2007

I know there is a place in your life, you could probably think of it right now, a place where you do not think you do enough or are enough or give enough. Right? Something you failed to do. “I didn’t give enough attention to my child today. I wasn’t loving enough to my friend. Oh yeah, I gave something, but it felt like a token. It wasn’t quite enough.”

“Oh, I haven’t been to church.” I hear this all the time. “I haven’t been to church in a few weeks. Forgive me. I just haven’t been around. I haven’t been there enough.” Enough of that. You are enough – right now.

The stewardship committee wanted to get us, as a church, out of the comparison game. We found out that there are about 2,500 non-profit organizations in Colorado Springs, all competing for the same donor dollars, and that includes us. Many of you, in addition to the church, also give to one of those. so often, the tone of our stewardship has been, “Well, you have all of these things,” and this is why you need to give to the church, before you think about those other ones.

What if we were to make a shift? From comparing and competing to being the place where we encourage one another to lead generous lives? What if that was the tone of our stewardship? Maybe next year, to encourage one another to lead generous lives, not just with regard to money, but with regard to time, attention, and service? To be generous with ourselves and forgiving of ourselves, saying, “Yeah, that’s enough.”

And what if, in doing that, we were to trust that by together becoming a generous people, that the church would flourish and that *all* of those places in which each one of us is connected in our wider community would flourish as well?

I know there is some anxiety in our church around growth. Some of you have seen things change, felt things change, and wondered if we would be the same church. I say, “Yes, let’s focus on growth, but growth of depth.” Let’s grow our hospitality so that what is not so important is how many people we welcome in the door but the extravagance of our welcome when they do. Let us focus not on our proliferation of programs but rather on our collective capacity for wonder. And let us not worry so much about how many ways we are involved in the community, but let us focus our energy so that there are some *very* meaningful ways in which we are connected.

We believe not just in a loving God in this church. I read somewhere, I do not remember, that it is easier to believe in a loving God than in a living God. Do you know where I am going with this? It is easier to believe that God is *there*, loving you, but not really active in your life, than to believe that God is *acting* in your life, right now, and that that same God is a loving God. So we believe in the living God who is also a loving God, who also abides here, in our midst and calls us to the next level.

So what would our next level of hospitality be? Our next level of extravagant welcome? A deep sense of acceptance, I suggest, so that everybody who walks in that door knows they are accepted, just as they are. They do not have to have a certain level of education or income or religious background. They do not have to be of a certain race. They do not have to have a certain lifestyle, certain sexual orientation or gender expression, or *all* of those things that we use to divide ourselves. They come as they are, and walking in the door, we welcome them extravagantly.

Believing in a loving and living God, how would our practice of spirituality change? We would have an engaged spirituality, wherein everyone would be involved in some form of practice, taking the next step on their spiritual pilgrimage. Whether it is walking the labyrinth or going to a Bible study or practicing contemplative prayer, we would become engaged. We would become the spiritual center of our community. We would become, dare I even say it, a sort of monastic community, so that people would look at First Congregational and say, “You know, they know how to sit, you know, to be with, and to listen to God.”

And how would believing in a living and loving God affect our outreach? We do some wonderful outreach, namely the Interfaith Hospitality Network, when we host, serving at Acacia dinners. And I know, even as I look out through this congregation, I see you, and I can recognize people who I know are involved in meaningful and wonderful ways in this community.

Not begrudging that, what would happen if we were to focus some of that energy and to engage in concrete, meaningful acts of outreach, whether serving or some form of witness in our community? I think we can do more of that. I think people should not have to come *here* to find out that the Spirit abides. We take the Spirit there and let it abide where people are.

Living & Abiding
November 11, 2007

Friends, well done on the stewardship campaign. Let us look forward to a very bright year, a year in which we have enough and where we are enough and yet, where we are always on the frontier of something new happening, where we do not fear the shaken world order, because we know it is God's future, a God who abides with us and with all people, who loves us and all people, and who lives among us and all people.

Amen.