



In another example of the mysterious ways in which the Holy Spirit moves, this Sunday represents the Sunday before the one year anniversary when I came to be priest-in-charge to and for St. John's. As such, it is a good time to reflect upon the past year and our efforts, individually and collectively, to accomplish the five tasks with which our time together is charged. Those tasks are:

- Befriending the past;
- Refreshing an understanding of identity and purpose;
- Facilitating changes in leadership;
- Rethinking denominational ties; and
- Building commitment to new leadership.

One mysterious part of this Sunday is that our reading from Haggai begins with the Persian King Darius sending the people of Israel back to Israel from the time of their exile in Babylon. For some of you, the years 2011 and 2012 felt like an exile – literally or figuratively. A time when you felt disconnected and perhaps even disenfranchised from this parish which had been home for you for many years. The comforting and comfortable was no more during those challenging times. What had been a source and a place of stability and sureness became something different.

As background to the reading from Haggai, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed when the people were exiled to Babylon around 586BCE. There was, then, no longer a specific place in Jerusalem where God resided, according to Jewish belief at this time. And so the book of Haggai begins with the people of Israel being returned to their own land about the year 520 BCE but with no place where God was believed to reside. How were they to be the people of God if God was no longer present with them because there was no Temple? Maybe, after the years of exile, some decided that worshipping God didn't matter anymore. They could just get on with their life without a Temple, without a relationship with God.

We read, beginning in chapter one, verse 5: “Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.”

The LORD Almighty is calling the people to stop and refocus on what is truly important: their relationship with God. It's easy for us to get caught up in our own daily concerns. Getting here or there. Running this or that errand. No time for prayer. No time for a call to a sick neighbor. No time for reading of and reflecting on scripture.

The prophet Haggai reminds the people of what is really important- their relationship with God. The people begin to rebuild the Temple. But the work is not quite up to snuff. The Temple is not as magnificent as it was before.

And so the LORD, through Haggai, is instructed to “Ask them, ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’”

Do not fear are words that we, too, need to hear and remember as we rebuild St. John's. Befriending the past means that we are acting with the realization that the past occurred. We, as a parish family, are different now from how we were then. Our history, while important, is only a prelude to what is to come.

Just as the people of Israel had to redefine who they were now that they were returned from the exile – now that they were engaged in rebuilding the Temple- the task of refreshing an understanding of our identity and purpose is to claim a new awareness of our identity and purpose separate and apart from all clergy who have served St. John's in the past. We do not want to forget the good and faithful ways in which each of the prior priests led and helped to shape this parish. Neither do we need to remain mired in the good or the challenging works of those leaders. Let us take what is good, learn from the challenges and determine how we move forward as faithful witnesses to the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

In January, 2014, we will hold our Annual Meeting. This time is a visible reminder that leadership changes over time. We will elect three new members of the Vestry and two Delegates to Diocesan Convention. At that time, we will also announce, I hope, some additional transitions for some of our various ministries. Many of you have served long and with great faithfulness in various ministries. Several of you have told me that you have hung on through the transition period to help with stability when so many things around you were challenging – and that you want to step back and take a deep breath.

Facilitating changes in leadership and building commitment to new leadership is thus a chance to those who have, as Paul wrote: “run the good race” to be acknowledged with joy and celebration and to hold up others among us who have wonderful gifts and talents that can help us grow into the next phase of who we are called to be here in Crawfordsville and the wider world. New leadership brings with it new ways of visioning and sometimes new ways that may not be as comfortable as the past. If we are true to scripture, though, we will recognize and support the gifts and talents that are rising to the fore. We can learn from those who bring new energy and new vision to our life and ministry together.

We are also tasked with rethinking denominational ties. We have been blessed with Larry Baumgardner's service to the reimagining task force. We have been blessed with Mark Kusmaul's service on the personnel committee. We have been blessed by the opportunities offered through Vestry College; the Barnabus Project which included the presence and participation of Steve Charles and Suzie Siamus; and the Pathways to Vitality vision that includes the participation of Jim Suren, Chas Cooksey and Meegan Reidy as leaders. We are also blessed by the denominational assistance that has enabled us to host an Education for Ministry group that includes 7 parishioners studying the Bible and Church History as well as creating a community within the larger community at large.

The book of Haggai ends with “‘On that day, I will take you, ... and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty” (Haggai 2:23). A signet ring, from at least the time of the Egyptians, declares identity and authority. Even today, some documents require being sealed to have legal effect. We don't often use wax seals today, but rather a device that imprints a design upon a page, signifying that the signature or the information is legitimate and valuable.

God, then, is telling Haggai and the people of Israel that God has chosen them. God has chosen us as well. In baptism we are marked with the sign of God's love by water and the cross. We are given a candle representing the light of the world, in Jesus and then passed down to us.

As we both look back and look forward, let us not remain mired in the past. Take what is good, learn from what was challenging, and envision what we might be as we live out, together, the command to love God and love neighbor. No, we will not always agree. We never did in the past so we should not expect it in the future. We can, however, remain committed to loving each other as best as we are able and as best as we understand God's call to us, reflected in the mission statement of St. John's:

God “calls people into relationship with God and with one another. Sustaining both of these relationships is key to building and supporting the community of faith. So is constant assessment of our expectations of each other and of St. John's as a witness to the love of God and the need to care for all of God's creation.” I “invite you to live in the present and yet to see the present beyond the misty allure of nostalgia, wishful thinking and all manner of other illusions ... A shared comprehension of what the reality is today can become the beginning of a new vision for tomorrow.”¹

Martha Sterne, in her reflection on the passage from Haggai, reminds us that we are not in this alone. The promises of God are promises of abundance in the past, in the present and in the future. ... 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, power and love.”²

¹ Thanks to Mary E. Johns and Martha Sterne in Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), pps 268-269.

² Id, p. 271.

The mission of St. John's gives us a focus as we move forward together:

“We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth, and witnessing our faith to the community at large.”

Unlike the people of Israel who believed that God only resided in the Temple, we believe that God resides all around us and in each of us. This community of St. John's is one place where we can join together to praise God. We “sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things” (Ps. 98:1). We recognize that the day of the Lord is here and now even as it is yet to come. It is our call to “always give thanks to God ... because God chose us as the first fruits” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

The five tasks we are to consider during my time as priest-in-charge are not tasks that will automatically go away or ever be truly completed if we are to continue listening and responding to the Word of God. They are indicators of questions we need to keep in front of us as we go forward together, loving God and loving neighbor. As we begin year two together, our work continues and is blessed by God, who has chosen us as his beloved. Rejoice in the Lord always, I say, rejoice! *Amen.*