

The Shaking of the Foundations
A Sermon on Haggai 1:15b-2:9
Proper 27
November 6, 2022

Introduction

This is our 18th week on the prophets. Rabbi Vered Harris will be here next week to deliver the message in our 19th and final week. She will be preaching on one of her favorite texts, Isaiah 65, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Vered will describe for us an authentic Jewish eschatology.

There is also eschatology in today's text, and I will be offering a Christian perspective on it. Not because a Christian perspective is superior, but because that is the only perspective I can give. Vered's perspective will deepen and enrich our own perspective.

The prophets can help us as we try to rebuild the church. They have a clearer vision of God than anyone else.

First Move: Rebuilding the Temple

The people are rebuilding the Temple. Some are despairing that it cannot compare to the Temple in all its splendor in Solomon's day, when Israel was at the height of its wealth and power and tribute from foreign nations was pouring into Israel to fill the Temple.

Is that a good thing to want? A return to the days when Israel was an imperial empire? Israel in Haggai's day is no longer an independent kingdom. There is no longer a Southern Kingdom called Judah. It is now a province of the Persian empire called Yehud. The people are recovering from the siege and conquest by Babylon in 587 B.C.E. and their exile in Babylon for nearly 70 years. Persia has conquered Babylon and allowed the people to return from exile. Persia gives the Israelites more freedom, but they are still a vassal state in an empire. When they finish rebuilding the Temple, it will no longer signify an independent and powerful monarchy for Israel, but the home of a tiny, impoverished province in Persia. The people are asking, how can we have a Temple without the associated monarchy that will draw the riches and honor it deserves as the House of God?

The text is very specific about the time. It is almost 18 months into the reign of King Darius of Persia. That would make it October of the year 520 BCE. It is

toward the end of the Feast of Booths, which celebrates the release of the people from bondage to Egypt and their dwelling in booths as they travel to Sinai.

Haggai is speaking at the site of the Temple that is being rebuilt. Construction began a year earlier. Haggai addresses his words to Zerubbabel, a grandson of the last king of Judah but who is not himself a king but is governor for the Persian province of Yehud. Haggai also addresses Joshua, the high priest, and the rest of the people. So Haggai is addressing all the people and their leaders.

According to rabbinic tradition, Haggai and Zechariah are the last of the Israelite prophets. It was believed that prophecy in Israel had come to an end.

The people cannot envision a rebuilt Temple without a king. They are dealing with questions of identity. They are making the transition from kings and prophets to priests. High priests would rule Israel for the next several centuries.

Haggai is not speaking for himself but for the Lord of Hosts, an ancient and elevated name of God. The Lord of Hosts tells all three groups: “Be strong and courageous and keep working.” The Lord of Hosts reassures them: “For I am with you.” God reminds them of the thing that he cut with their ancestors in faith when he led them out of Egypt. *Cut a thing with you* is an idiomatic expression that refers to the covenant as being sealed with the blood of animals who had been offered as sacrifices. God reassures them again: “Fear not! My spirit stands in your midst.”

God gives them a second reason to keep working: God will act dramatically again, in just a little while, to shake the foundations of the earth. This is an image in the Old Testament that is usually associated with the Day of the Lord, when God delivers Israel from its enemies. Haggai uses this not as an image of judgment but as an image of salvation. And it is not happening at the end of the age but soon. God will shake the nations and they will send their silver and gold to fill the Temple. The Lord of Hosts says, “The silver is mine and the gold is mine.” It is not the king who is bringing tribute to Israel, but the Lord of Hosts—the nations will send their silver and gold to the Temple in recognition of the glory of God.

Israel’s monarchy had been pretty much a disaster according to the history told in 1 and 2 Kings. The kings had failed to shepherd the people, to care and provide for them. Now God will bring shalom to all the people of Israel. Shalom means peace and wholeness.

Haggai may be looking back to the time of the judges when Israel had no king. God ruled the people directly. To draw on Jeremiah 31, the covenant will be written on the hearts of the people instead of being enforced by the king and the courts.

Haggai is reassuring the people that God will be with them, even without a Davidic monarch. Their task now is to continue to do the work of rebuilding the

Temple. Don't worry about the results. Trust that God will restore the splendor of the Temple. The splendor will be even greater, as much spiritual as material. Israel will be a land where all people experience shalom.

Second Move: A Thin Place

The church is experiencing an identity crisis today. COVID has accelerated the decline of the church that has been taking place over the last 50 years. The landscape has segregated into megachurches and microchurches. Microchurches are churches like us that have 20 or less in worship on Sunday. Microchurches make up about 40% of all churches. And fewer people are going to church. Many young people have given up on church.

What does that mean for us as we try to envision a new start for this church? Is it our vision to be like the churches of the 1960s that were full of children and youth? Do we want to be like the megachurches, only much smaller? Or should we try to do a new thing, not even knowing for sure what that new thing is? How can we help God bring shalom to all people?

We are in a thin place, between the ending of one age and the beginning of another. The foundations of our churches and all our institutions are being shaken.

Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, addressed just such a time at the end of World War II. Tillich was a German theologian who moved to the United States in 1933. His homeland in Europe saw catastrophic destruction during the war. It destroyed the faith of the people that reason and science would help lead an upward march toward progress. Science had created a new threat that people had never faced before: nuclear weapons that terrified people. They gave governments the ability to destroy large parts of the world.

It was a cynical age in Europe. People were cynical about world leaders and the countries they represented. People were cynical about the church and its ability to respond with a word of hope.

Tillich turned to the prophets. He believed that they could see what others could not. They saw God as the foundation on which all foundations are laid. Their power sprang from the fact that they did not really speak of the foundations of the earth as such, but of the One who laid the foundations and would shake them. They did not speak of the doom of the nations as such, but of the One who brings doom for the sake of eternal justice and salvation.

Tillich recognized that there is scarcely one thing about which we may not be cynical. "But if the foundations of this place and all places begin to crumble, cynicism

itself crumbles with them. And only two alternatives remain—despair, which is the certainty of eternal destruction, or faith, which is the certainty of eternal salvation.”

Prophets throughout the centuries have gotten a bad rap as prophets of judgment and doom. After hearing 18 weeks of preaching on the prophets, I hope you will agree that the prophets bring good news. Their work climaxes with oracles of salvation.

Tillich asks:

How could the prophets speak as they did? How could they paint these most terrible pictures of doom and destruction without cynicism or despair? It was because beyond the sphere of destruction, they saw the sphere of salvation; in the doom of the temporal, they saw the manifestation of the Eternal. It was because they were certain that they belonged within the two spheres, the changeable and the unchangeable. For only the person who is also beyond the changeable, not bound within it alone, can face the end. All others are compelled to escape, to turn away.

Tillich concluded, “For in these days the foundations of the earth do shake. May we not turn our eyes away, may we not close our ears and our mouths! But may we rather see, through the crumbling of a world, the rock of eternity and the salvation which has no end.”

The challenge is to look for God’s appearance in the thin places, when the foundations have fallen away and all that remains is the foundation on which all foundations are laid.

Third Move: Transforming the Church

We live in a postmodern age. We are suspicious of metanarratives. That means that we recognize that our understandings of reality are culturally conditioned. We see that the metanarratives from the past are the perspectives of ruling elites. What they see as reality is a narrative that describes their own perspective.

To people in the cultural majority, it feels like the foundations are being shaken when these metanarratives are questioned. They respond by doubling down on the metanarrative, requiring that all school children take patriotic history instead of being exposed to diverse perspectives of history.

How will we respond to the shaking of the foundations today? With despair? With fear? Will we double down on a traditional understanding of church and theology? Or will we look for God in the thin places?

Part of the challenge in our faith journeys today is to strip away all the cultural trappings of Christianity, the rituals, the creeds, the embedded theology that we learned growing up. We are doing that on Wednesday night in *After Jesus Before Christianity*, questioning the metanarrative that the tradition has crafted to describe the first two centuries of Christianity.

The idea is not to tear down the church but to try to get to what is real. What do we know and believe about Jesus? About God? About the kingdom? That is what will bring us peace and wholeness.

The prophets can help us. They had a clearer vision of God than anyone else. Jesus got his vision of God from the prophets.

Haggai brought his vision of God to an Israelite society that had been deconstructed. They had no wealth, no land of their own, no king, no Temple.

His message was to trust in God, trust that God will bring shalom to all people. Those other things don't matter. You can bring glory and honor to God and fill the Temple with splendor by continuing to do the work that needs to be done.

That is a lot like Jesus's vision of the kingdom. It is a place where all people will have enough. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Can we build a community today that is based on this vision of God and the kingdom? God cares for and provides for all people, even the ones that we think are evil and unrighteous.

In one of his letters from a Nazi prison camp in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that we are approaching a completely religionless age. "It is now obvious that Christianity has always been merely a form of religion." It is "a historically conditioned and transitory form of human expression. . . . The foundations are being pulled out from under all that Christianity has previously been for us."

Bonhoeffer asked questions that we have not answered 78 years later:

Is there such a thing as a religionless Christian?

If religion is the only garb in which Christianity is clothed . . . , what then is religionless Christianity?

How do we talk about God without religion, that is, without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on?

What would Bonhoeffer say about our vision for the church today? Praise bands? Children's programs? Is that where God is calling us?

Mary and I have lived in Oklahoma all our lives. Mary grew up in Yukon. I grew up in Enid. We have both lived or worked in the Oklahoma City area our entire

adult lives. Sometimes I think things in Oklahoma *and in the church* are hopeless. Not our church but *the church*. It seems like we are circling the toilet.

We talk about getting away from it all and moving to New Mexico. It is a blue state. We wouldn't be surrounded by neighbors who want to Stand Up for America and who demonize liberals as being woke. We would be getting away from evangelicals who cannot see the idolatry in Christian nationalism.

But that would be giving up. We would be surrendering to the hard hearts that rule this state. We would be giving up on the church. We're not done yet. We want to stay and help rebuild the state and the church.

Bonhoeffer was safe in 1939. He had a professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He could see what was happening in Germany and decided to return and suffer with the Confessing Church in Germany. The Confessing Church thought that the church in Germany had become idolatrous, draped with Nazi flags and confessing its loyalty to the Fuhrer. Bonhoeffer wrote to his mentor, Reinhold Niebuhr, "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." Niebuhr said that Bonhoeffer displayed "the finest logic of Christian martyrdom."

I do not mean to suggest that Mary and I are martyrs. I do mean to suggest that the church is in desperate need of transformation, and that Mary and I would like to participate in the transformation of the church.

Conclusion

I believe that we as a community in Christ should continue to focus on the kingdom. Not the platform of a political party but peace and justice. Our culture is badly divided, and it is more important now than ever that we be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. There are lots of unanswered questions about how we do that. I look forward to working through them with you.

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