

Take Courage*

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

St. Philip's, Rochester Hills

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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen..

Good Morning

They were finally back home. After years and years and years at long last they are back in the place of their ancestors; This is the place for some 40 years they had longed and dreamed and for which they had prayed. Some of them have been born in exile, born in captivity in Babylon and so this place, this home that has inhabited their parents' and grandparents' dreams for so long, is for them a strange new land.

Darius, the king of Persia has come to power, and he has sent 50,000 Israelites back home to Judah. Go back home, rebuild your city and your temple. That is where our story in Haggai picks up this morning.

The people are back in Jerusalem and now what do they do, for that which they have prayed so long has come true?

They do what many of us do when we get something we thought we wanted so desperately. We rejoice, and then after a bit of time, we may find ourselves saying, "Well this is not exactly what I thought it would be..." It's a mess. Picture Gaza, but maybe not quite so bad. They say to themselves, "This isn't how I imagined it." And "Wow—this is what I prayed for?...This is going to be an inordinate amount of work."

They are home and Jerusalem is a rubble wreck. The temple, Solomon's amazing testament to the one true God, is ruined, the Babylonians, when they overran the city some 66 years ago, trashed the place, putting a very fine point on the fact the Israelites were no longer in charge.

This is when our prophet Haggai, arose about 520 BCE. He functioned publicly as a prophet for only about two years and his book, the record of his prophesies is just two chapters long. If you find yourself thinking that you haven't ever heard of this particular prophet, well you wouldn't be alone. Yet—what might this somewhat obscure prophet from 2700 years ago have to say to us now?

Pretty much what he said to his people then.

You have been sent back home—to rebuild Jerusalem—to rebuild God's temple. And by the way—have any of you looked at what you've gotten done?

“How many of you remember the temple in its glory days: the beauty, the majesty, the splendor...have you looked at it now?

Its kind of a mess.”

Why is this—the prophet Haggai asks?

You laid the foundation stones and that’s as far as you got...you clearly then turned your attention back to your own homes. Your own personal concerns.

Which makes sense—he concedes—

but now—he asks what about God?

What about God’s Holy Temple?

You laid the foundation and then stopped...

Have you forgotten our God?

The prophet Haggai says all of this to the son of the high priest-- and to the son of the former king.

But then he does not go on—he does not continue scolding, he does not lambast the people for returning to their own personal concerns, paying attention to matters that may not seem so overwhelming.

Instead, he speaks to them with compassion, with understanding.

He says, “You who are so discouraged. You who see no hope of the things of the past ever being restored in the future, you who look around and wonder how you will ever overcome this sad state of affairs...to them Haggai says,

“Take courage, take courage all you people of the land, says the Lord, for I am with you, according to the promise I made to you when I took you out of slavery in the land of Egypt. I am with you. My spirit abides with you; do not fear. Do not fear, for I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the treasure of all the nations shall come....and this place [this newly rebuilt temple] shall be greater than it was before.”

And you know what?

They did have faith—they did rebuild---against all odds—they remade their city and God’s Holy Temple and it was— it was greater than it ever was before.

Can it be for us as it was for them?

Can we too—build upon what we have now and with God—create faith communities that are even more than they were before? Different. Changed. More...

What might it take?

It might take that we remember that we are never ever called to do things on our own.

We might remember that no task that is set before us is ever intended for us to do all alone.

How might we return to the foundations of our faith and remember that every promise we have ever made in the Christian faith has been uttered with the words,

“I will, WITH GOD’S HELP.”

With God’s help!

How might we include in our daily lives, time with God, time with scripture, time even with obscure prophets from the Bible, so that we too might have an abiding sense that God longs for us to,

“Take courage all you people of the Lord. My spirit abides with you. Do not fear.”

This then is my prayer for St. Philip’s as you continue to dream, work and create your future. *“Take courage all you people of the Lord. My spirit abides with you. Do not fear.”*

This is my dream for all of our faith communities in our diocese, and this is my daily prayer for all of us. *“Take courage, my spirit abides.. Do not fear.”*

May we all know as Haggai, the obscure prophet of old promised, “[God’s] spirit abides among us, so we need not fear,” but rather pray and do and believe.

Amen.