

Haggai 2:1-9 The Glory of This Present House
Luke 20:27-38
November 6, 2022

Part of the story of the Bible is the history of Israel, not so much in terms of what happened, but what it meant, and what it meant theologically. For thousands of years, when people got together to discuss the meaning of things, and they were probably like us, they didn't discuss it often, but in a crisis . . . they were primarily concerned with theological meaning. It was the spirit of their times. Things have changed in the modern period. Theological meaning is still powerful, but not as dominant as it once was.

Some may see this development as an attack on religious faith, and we can have all kinds of conversations about that, but I don't think so. The spirit of modernity is pragmatic, that is, having to do with the tasks of everyday life, how to do things, make life easier, get things done.

The change from a more philosophical or theological approach to meaning to a more practical approach fits right in with the industrial revolution and the advancements in technology that are associated with it, driven by practical concerns, solutions to immediate problems. The danger is to fail to ever ask about meaning.

Perhaps the decline of the relative significance of theological meaning is a loss that should be reconsidered. There is certainly no rule against

theological thinking. Today's reading from the Book of Haggai speaks to this and can be some help.

The people of Judea had been conquered, that was their problem to solve, and it had no practical solution. It is always important for us to remember *that* part of the context. Try to put yourself in their shoes. It is really the only way to come close to understanding the bible, especially the part we call the Old Testament, because the story of Israel *is* the story of being conquered, and we can say that their telling represents all those who have had that experience. And they were, first by the Assyrians in the north, then by the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, which had been the center of its life, and they led the leaders into exile.

Later the Persians came along and defeated the Babylonians, and they allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild, including the Temple. This marks the beginning of the second temple period, and it is in the early part of that time, that the prophet Haggai did his work.

It seems that they remembered the original temple, which had been built by King Solomon, several hundred years before, as better than the new one they were building. Think about that. It had all been destroyed before they were born, none of them had ever seen it. They remembered the old as being more grand, more beautiful, better than the new one they were building at the time.

I can relate to this sentiment. Architecture changes with technology and resources over time. Personally, I am not very impressed with contemporary church architecture, or just modern architecture in general. It lacks character in some way.

For the last one hundred years the world has rebuilt all its cities with tall buildings made of concrete, glass, and steel. As time has passed artistic representations, arches and elaborate brickwork have given way to geometric shapes, rectangles and triangles and squares, in a style that is actually known as “brutalism.” Anything gothic, or colonial, or neoclassical, which is to me, more interesting, and quite frankly, more beautiful, has gone out-of-style. The new buildings are functional, and in terms of today’s dollars, less expensive.

But there is more to life than architecture, and more to theological meaning than anything buildings can convey. Theology always has to do with relationships, and relationships are spiritual in nature.

The message of the Book of Haggai, as well as the preponderance of the Bible, only has meaning in the context of a people’s relation to God. The buildings we build cannot create that relationship, but are an expression of it. The question about meaning is a conversation about God, and conversations about God always end up being conversations about relationships with God, and conversations about relationships with God always ends up a kind of comparison between the pain and suffering we know,

and the experience of life as beauty, wonder, and goodness. They wanted their faith, expressed in the temple they were building, to be adequate. They wanted to know that their future life was going to be better than their recent past.

The message is that what is ahead, is better than what is behind, or another way of saying it is that what is good far outweighs what is bad, and that is an item of faith from people who had seen the worst. Paul said it this way in Romans, “I am convinced that all our present suffering is not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed in us,” or in the words of Frederick Buechner;

“What’s lost is nothing, set next to what’s found,” or, “All the death there ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”

The Lord says, “In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, and the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and *the desired of all the nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory . . .* The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house . . . and in this place, I will grant peace.”

The historical truth is that the so-called second temple was also destroyed, this time by the Romans almost 2,000 years ago, and it has yet to be rebuilt. We must face the reality that the temple was a place of animal sacrifices and burnt grain offerings and the faithful no longer worship in that way. Most people do not work

in agricultural pursuits, nor keep animals for breeding nor store up grain. Things are not likely to change back in that direction any time soon.

In the meantime we can still translate the meaning into our situation. No matter what kind of buildings we have, and I believe it is good for us to have buildings, space to worship in, and to serve, spaces that will become “sanctuaries of the sacred” for us; in them we will learn that life is sacred, and is a precious gift, and that *every piece of ground* is holy.

It’s holiness is not because of any architectural design or artistic presentation, but because it is filled with God’s ever-present love, and we, who may never have met each other if it wasn’t for this place, will gather to praise, and pray, and learn, and grow and serve together. I am not talking about buildings anymore.

When we do not get too caught up in our middle of the 20th century protestant traditional setting and style, a place like this still has the power to accompany us along life’s journey of faith; and befriending us to each other, uniting us in faith, to capture the greatest glory that by grace human beings can achieve, which happens when we love each other and serve Christ together.

So that like that second temple was for three or four hundred years, the glory of the present house is greater than the former, because of the God who indwells it and the people, the desired of the nation, that come into it.

From John Baillie:

O God, you have been the refuge of good and wise people in every generation. Throughout the ages you have challenged men and women to realize their full humanity, you have been the Lord and giver of life, the source of all knowledge, and the fountain of all goodness.

O God, you have always been there, you are with us now, and you endure forever. We thank you for this well-worn Christian path, a road beaten hard by the footsteps of saints and apostles, prophets and martyrs.

Thank you for the signposts and warning signals which are there at every corner, and which we can understand through the study of the Bible, and history, and the great literature of the world. Above all, we give you sincere and humble thanks for the great gift of Jesus Christ, the pioneer of our faith, and that we are not called to face any temptation or trial which he did not first endure.

Help us to profit from these great memories of the ages gone by, and to enter into the glorious inheritance which you have prepared for us; through Christ our Lord. Amen

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