

# *The Best Is Yet to Come*

**Haggai 1:15 - 2:9 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17**

***Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church***

**November 11, 2007**

Some of you have heard me tell about my performance in the Rose Bowl, New Year's Day, 1965. I was a sophomore at Orange High School, but a set of unusual circumstances allowed me to get into the game with the band from Oregon State University.

In November and December of 1964 the Northwest was stricken by major flooding. The Oregon State band, preparing for a rare Rose Bowl appearance, couldn't find a dry field on which to practice. One of their band members was the son of my high school band director, and so they worked it out for the Oregon State band to come to Orange. The band members stayed in our homes, and practiced at our high school.

I don't remember much about the football game, except that Michigan beat Oregon State. But I remember the half-time show very well. The Oregon State band built its half-time show around music from *My Fair Lady*. Their last piece was "On the Street Where You Live." The band played the tune as it formed itself into four right angles, meant to look like a street corner. A few of us lucky Orange High band members were recruited as extras. We dressed up as unusual characters and acted out some of the typical things that might be happening "On the Street Where You Live." Three people were rolling dice in a crap game. A girl dressed up like a hooker and got picked up by a passerby. Another Orange high student and I dressed up like cowboys. We approached each other from the opposite goal posts, ending the whole scene with a gunfight on the fifty-yard line.

This was the half-time show of the Rose Bowl in 1965, acted out by 15-year-olds helping out a short-handed college band. At the time the whole point of the skit was to be funny. We kids thought of it as laughable. It was anachronistic fantasy. The policeman was dressed like a Keystone cop from a silent movie, the prostitute looked like a Flapper from the 20's, and the cowboys were reenacting a high noon scene from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Old West. How absurd that "on the street where you live" one would find gambling, prostitution, and violence.

But I wonder, did the writer of that half-time show think we were dealing with absurdities? Could it have been adept social commentary? Wake up, America, as you tune in en masse to the Rose Bowl game on New Year's Day. Just what is happening on the street corners of America? Are our neighborhoods in 2007 more or less safe than they were in 1965, or 1920, or 1850?

In the midst of change, we often find ourselves longing for a past that was simpler, slower, safer, more stable. That is the way we remember the past, whether or not it really was.

The prophet Haggai stood with his fellow Israelites who had returned from exile. They had returned home again. It was with great anticipation that they had journeyed back to Jerusalem, remembering the time before the great changes. But when they got

back home their hearts sank. Haggai stood with them as they looked at the ruins of what was once the Temple.

"Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?"

No one in the crowd felt like shouting "Amen", though they were fully convinced of the truth that Haggai spoke. They had returned, but they could see that life just wasn't going to be the same any more.

Then Haggai spoke more words to the people. He spoke God's word to the King, "Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel." He spoke God's word to the high priest, "take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak." He spoke God's word to the whole congregation "take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear."

That is the word we need to hear: "take courage ... work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts."

Some of the people thought to themselves - work for what? We can't put it back the way it was? This Temple was built when Solomon was king - when Solomon was the richest monarch in all the world. Now we are poor. Now we are a bunch of ex-prisoners. It is all we can do to eek out our own existence. If we rebuild the Temple it will be an inadequate replica of its splendor in the past.

Haggai says, you are partly right. This Temple will not be like the old one. That is because the old one wasn't good enough. What used to be is not what is supposed to be! "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts."

The people are wondering if the Temple can be restored, if their pre-exile lives can be reconstructed. But God is calling the people to Restoration-Plus! Our pre-exile life is not what God intends for us. The Good Old Days were not good enough. There is a reason everything fell apart, and if we just put it back the way it was, it will all fall apart again.

We were privileged last week to work alongside the people of New Orleans building in the midst of devastation. In the middle of that week I took my tired body from the gutted home we were wall-boarding back to Rayne Memorial UMC, took a shower, and felt inspired as I listened to the church choir with string ensemble beautifully rehearsing the Fauré *Requiem*. Somehow the music communicated the vitality of the churches we visited in New Orleans. The pulse of that vitality is magnified because of what they have been through and how they continue to respond.

Some members of our team connected with the ministries that these churches are undertaking. Partnering with resources in the community, free clinics are being set up with nurses and doctors on site. They attended a neighborhood meeting in the Lower 9th Ward, that part of the city that was the most devastated by the storm. At our team vesper service that evening they shared the strength exuded by the leaders in that community. They have organized in order to have a voice in their future, which they do not envision as the restoration of their community, but the renewal of their community into something better than it was.

There are times in our lives when we look around us and see ruins. We grieve the death of parent or spouse or child. We feel that our neighborhood is at risk. We are

overwhelmed by the needs around us. The soldiers that we honor on this Veteran's Day have stood in the midst of ruins. Often it is their own lives that they despair of putting back together again.

The word of the Lord comes to us from the prophet Haggai today. "Take courage." We come not to cry over what used to be, but to experience God's presence giving us courage to build toward a more glorious vision. God is the keel that keeps us upright and on course through seas of change. Apart from the presence of God, we are lost.

Therefore, nothing we do together as the community of the Church is as important as enabling people to experience the presence of God. (Note: this is a reiteration of our church's mission statement: "to joyfully share Christ's love"). Hear it again: nothing the church does is as important as enabling people to experience the presence of God. It is the experience of the presence of God that enables us to renew our lives, our churches and our communities.

Paul said it in this morning's reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. "For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:14)

To "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" is to experience the presence of God. And it is through the "proclamation of the good news" that this happens.

Paul's message to the Thessalonians is the same as Haggai's message in Jerusalem. Paul also writes in an unsettled time. Paul's time is like Haggai's time is like the times of our lives. And it is in all these times that the experience of the presence of God transforms life from despair to resurrection. These are the times that we may experience the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, because we have been called through the proclamation of the good news. So we tell the story of Jesus to one another and know once again that God's love is real.

Let us joyfully share Christ's love. Amen.