

Fearful and Faithful

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Luke 20:20-26

“...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 when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.”

“Do not fear.” These are the words God is forever saying to God’s people. But we *are* afraid. This is the Sunday before the election and, for mostly opposite reasons, each of us is afraid for the future of our country; afraid for our children and our children’s children; afraid for our financial well-being; afraid for the nation’s status in the world; afraid, in sum, for life as we think it will become if our candidate should not prevail. This is also the Sunday before the Sunday when we bring our pledges forward and, for mostly unfaithful reasons, I am afraid you will not pledge because the ministers let you down; afraid all the appeals have left you still thinking a modest contribution will do; afraid you think there are rich people in the pews so you do not need to give much; afraid our pledges will fall short and I will be anxious for another year.

When fears such as these prevail, according to psychologist Steven Stosney, people tend to revert to what he calls “toddler brain,” an emotional all-or-nothing thinking, as well as “toddler coping” that outwardly involves blame, denial and avoidance; and inwardly induces restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, fatigue, concentration difficulties and sleepless nights. Are you with me? I would add that fear also has a way of overriding what is human in us. Fear curves us in on ourselves; causes us to grasp and hoard; keeps us from daring the new and unknown; makes us wary of others. But all these symptoms presume a person’s fearfulness only redounds to herself.

In an essay entitled simply “Fear,” Marilynne Robinson considers the social dimensions of fear. Her thesis has two parts: “first, contemporary America is full of fear. And second, fear is not a Christian habit of mind.” When a nation is full of fear, she observes, “Fearfulness obscures the distinction between real threat on the one hand and on the other the terrors that beset those who see threat everywhere....Granting the [real] perils of the world,” she goes on, “it is potentially a very costly indulgence to fear indiscriminately, and to try to stimulate fear in others, just for the excitement of it, or because to do so channels anxiety or loneliness or prejudice or resentment into an emotion that can seem, to those who indulge it, like shrewdness or courage or patriotism. But,” she concludes, “no one seems to have an unkind word to say about fear these days, un-Christian as it surely is.”

What to do? In the shadow of this coming Tuesday and Sunday next, I opened the Bible with trepidation to Haggai. Of all the obscure little books we could have been given by the lectionary this morning, Haggai is one of the littlest and the most obscure. Yet the words and the strategies of the prophet credited with rebuilding the Second Temple could not be more relevant to the situation we find ourselves in right now. Prophesying between August and December in 520 B.C.E., two decades after the people of Judah had returned from exile in Babylon, he tells them to get over their fears and get on with a life of faithful service to God. Easier said than done, I think.

Haggai was sent to a people hell-bent on getting their old lives back: lavishly restoring the houses they once had lived in, circling the wagons around kith and kin, and socking away what little money they made to secure their individual futures. All were ways of coping with what we might call the post-traumatic stress of being exiled from life as they knew it. All this they did for themselves while willfully ignoring the fact that the Temple, the foundation and center of their common life, was in ruins. The prophet’s assessment of the situation sent him to his knees. To put Marilynne Robinson’s words in the prophet’s mouth, Haggai knew that “Those who forget God, the single assurance of our safety however that word may be defined [and the single assurance of our future, I might add], can be recognized in the fact that they make irrational responses to irrational fears.”

Instead of playing to their fears, Haggai names the fearful emptiness of their grasping lives: “You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes....My house is in ruins while you hurry off to your own,” says the Lord. Shaming worked! The people listened and, in five short years, the Temple was completed. But soon the word on the street was a word of despair: the new house was not like the old house.

So Haggai called together the leaders and the people and asked who among them had seen the Temple in its former glory. Only a few old hands in the crowd went up. It would be as if I were to ask who among us remembers the former glory of this church in the 1950’s. Four or five hundred children in church school, two services that

filled the sanctuary, Bible studies and couples clubs galore! Or if I asked who among us saw this nation in its former glory? The economy soaring, babies booming, incomes rising, companies thriving? A few hands. As for the rest, the millennials of Haggai's day like the millennials of ours had no memory of the Temple's former glory. There also must have been others for whom the Temple's glory evoked memories of exclusion—outcasts, lepers; just so, if you were black or gay or a woman with ambitions and dreams of her own, the 1950's were no Camelot! Social location has everything to do with how past glory is remembered.

Yet Haggai's focus is on those who remembered well, for next he asks: "How does it look to you now?" and anticipates their answer saying, "Is it not in your sight as nothing?" Here is the moment when I think he intuits the fear just beneath the surface of the older generation's disappointment and despair. According to Ezra, because the Second Temple appeared to be just a shell of the First, the old timers wept at its dedication when they remembered their past; even as the millennials shouted for joy, seeing in the Second Temple the *potential* for a new future. "It is the weepers," a seminary classmate of mine writes, "who are Haggai's main audience when he says with sympathy, 'Is it not in your sight as nothing?'" Himself an old-timer like me, my classmate imagines them thinking, "If we sacrificed in the old way, did ritual in the old way, dressed in the old way, then somehow all those people who had moved on and changed and become indifferent today would just come back again and act like they did back when we were young."

Haggai could have thrown in with the weepers and been hailed as the champion of their despair. Instead he simply acknowledged their despair and, in the next breath, told them to get to work because God was with them. That is to say, the prophet's antidote for fear was to evoke trust in the God who was present in their human history and in whose love all history will finally be resolved. What matters now is not the Temple in its former glory, but their faithfulness to the God who first promised to be their God back when they had nothing but their freedom and the clothes on their backs and manna sufficient for the day from God's hand. Not the 50's but the 30's! "Take courage," he says to the governor, to the priest, to the people. God's spirit abides among you, all of you. God's spirit abides in the spaces between you. Work, says the Lord of hosts, for I am with you. Fear not.

One thing is certain: come Tuesday, either the person you greatly fear will bring us all to ruin or the person you vaguely hope will keep us from the abyss will have been elected. And another thing is certain: come next Sunday, the work we have to do as Christ's church's in a divided, distrustful, fearful nation will be all the more critical. It is the work and the witness of a people who trust that, in life and in death, all we have and all we are belongs to God. Therefore we will not fear. No matter who is president, we will continue to sing God's praises, proclaim the gospel, teach our children of God's love, care for one another, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, house the homeless, take in the refugee, and harbor the vulnerable. Back to my unfaithful fears about our stewardship! Even though shaming worked for Haggai, I do not think it will work for me.

To tell you the truth, the theologian who calmed my fears about your pledges was not Bonhoeffer or Barth but Erma Bombeck. Raised in a family of the Depression that saved, even hoarded, Bombeck often was asked if she saved up ideas for her columns, a question that prompted her to write "What's Saved Is Often Lost." "I don't save anything," she begins.

My pockets are empty at the end of the week. So is my gas tank. So is my file of ideas. I trot out the best I've got and, come the next week, I bargain, I whimper, make promises, cower and throw myself on the mercy of the Almighty for just three more columns in exchange for cleaning my oven....

I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will be like this: "So, empty your pockets. What you got left of your life? Any dreams that were unfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around?"

And I will answer, "I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born."

That, it seems to me, is living in the trust that conquers fear. Therefore I implore you to give it a try: empty your pockets for the sake of the church's witness to God's love, trusting that the God who first promised to be our God when we had nothing, the God in whose hand history is held, will be with us. Take courage, O you Presbyterians of Chestnut Hill. Work, for God's spirit abides among us no matter who is elected. Fear not.