

Not Like It Used to Be  
Ezra 3:10-13; Haggai 2:1-9

Things just aren't the way they used to be. When I first moved into the manse on Church Street, I was literally surrounded by church members: Mr. Lindsay lived across the street, Miss Dorothy Gordon lived on one side and Miss Isabelle on the other, with Miss Dot Shaifer next to her. In those days, we had 168 members on the roll – now we have around 100. We can look around this room and see the empty places where folks used to sit every Sunday morning, and of course we miss them.

And then there are all these vacant seats down front on either side. We had students from Chamberlain-Hunt worshipping with us from 1879 until 2014, but no more. The empty campus up on the hill reminds us that things aren't like they used to be.

And there are other empty buildings around town, aren't there? The paper-tube plant. The hardwood flooring factory. The cotton-seed oil mill. People who worked in those industries used to live in our town and shop in the stores and sit in these pews. Things just aren't the way they used to be.

But we aren't the only American community that has gone through such drastic change in the last 15 years. According to CNN, the United States as a whole has lost 5 million manufacturing jobs since the year 2000. In 1960, 1 in 4 Americans worked in manufacturing, and now only 1 in 10 do. Things just aren't what they used to be.

And morality in America isn't in better shape than the economy, is it? All of us remember when the broader American culture simply assumed that Christian ethics were correct. Who would have imagined that same-sex marriage and transgender rights would not only be broadly accepted but enforced by the government? Things sure aren't what they used to be.

The people of Haggai's day could certainly understand, couldn't they? We remember that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, torn down the Temple and carried the people off into exile. Ezra chapter 3 tells about the beginning of their project to rebuild the Temple after their return from exile. When the foundation was laid, they had a celebration with singing, clashing cymbals and blowing trumpets. God had been good to them. He had allowed them to come back to the Promised Land and to worship Him once again.

But while so many of the people were shouting for joy and singing God's praise, another sound could be heard. Verse 12 says that many of the old men, those who remembered how grand and glorious Solomon's Temple had been, were crying just as loudly as the other people were shouting for joy. They cried because they couldn't imagine how the new Temple could possibly come close to Solomon's Temple in its beauty and splendor. How, for example, could they possibly get enough bronze to recreate the two huge pillars flanking the front door, not to mention the huge basin or sea that held water for the ritual washings? How could they afford enough gold to make the lampstands and to cover the tables of the showbread? Who would be able to fashion the tremendous cherubim that stood inside the Holy of Holies, on either side of the Ark of the Covenant? And where was the Ark itself, which disappeared from the historical record when the first Temple was destroyed? How could they possibly put things back the way they used to be?

And now, as we remember what Haggai chapter 1 said last week, even though the people had tried to rebuild the Temple, they were facing all kinds of opposition from the people of the land, those who weren't worshipping God in the right way. The culture around them was in no way supportive of their efforts.

Yes, they had good reason to be discouraged, when they compared how things were with the way things used to be. And maybe we feel the same way. So, what can we learn from what God told them? How can God's word to them help us with our discouragement that things aren't the way they used to be?

Well, strangely enough, one of the ways we can deal with discouragement is to take a look at the past. For what did God tell the people in verse 5? He said, "I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt." In other words, God wanted them to look back, not at some idealized past that they would try to recreate, but at how God had been faithful to them through the years. After all, no one wanted to be slaves again, but God did want the people to remember how He had kept His promise to bring them out of Egypt, just as He had brought them out of exile in Babylon. If He had kept His promises to their ancestors, and if He had kept His promises to them in their own personal experience, surely they could trust Him to keep His promises for the present and the future.

And we need to have the same sort of healthy view of history. For no human culture since the Fall of Man has been perfect. Every society is marred by sin, just as all of us are as individuals. The Port Gibson that was able to build this sanctuary did it with slave labor. The thriving Port Gibson of the 1950's was disfigured by racial segregation. But just as God was with His people to bring them out of slavery in Egypt and to bring them out of exile in Babylon, He was with our ancestors to bring them through the grinding poverty following the Civil War and the infestation of the boll weevil. And we can be sure that He will keep His promises for today.

And what are those promises? In verse 4, God told the people of Haggai's day, "I am with you." Think about that. God didn't just know what His people were going through. He wasn't just aware of their poverty and their weakness, of their opponents and their discouragement. God was right with them in the midst of all their problems.

But His promise was even greater than that. In verse 5, God said, "My Spirit remains among you." Ark or no ark, Temple or no Temple, in the person of His Holy Spirit, God was dwelling with His people. No amount of opposition could keep God away from them. No matter how discouraged they felt, nothing could change the reality of God's presence with His people.

And, as we read in our responsive reading, Jesus promised the same thing to His disciples – He promised to send us a Comforter, a Counselor to be with us forever. In fact, Jesus didn't just say that His Spirit would be with us – no, He said the Holy Spirit would be in us.

And Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would empower us to do great things – even greater works than He Himself had done. Now, how could that possibly be true? Well, it makes sense if we look at this promise, not in terms of intensity, but in terms of extent. In other words, during His earthly ministry, Jesus was just one man, living in one place. But because He has sent His Holy Spirit to fill the whole Church, that means His power is now living within millions of people all over the world. It is that same power in which we are called to share and through which we are called to work.

And God also called the people in Haggai's day to express their trust in Him in concrete ways. In verse 5, God told them not to be afraid. Instead, in verse 4, He told them to be strong – in fact, this was so important, that He repeated it three times, to Zerubbabel the governor, to Joshua the High Priest, and to all the people. In spite of their difficulties, in spite of all the good reasons they had to be discouraged, God told them not to give in to fear, but instead to be firm, to be courageous.

And how were they to express this fearless strength? By working on the task God had set before them, by building the Temple. Just so, Christ calls us to build the new Temple, the Body of Christ, the Church, by proclaiming the good news to those who don't yet trust in Him. Just as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth will help us remember what Jesus has taught us, guiding us into all truth, we are called to share the truth of His love and grace, His presence and power, in spite of the circumstances of our lives, in spite of the discouragement we might feel. For if Christ has kept His promises to us in the past, and if Christ dwells within us even today, why shouldn't we expect Him to do great things, even here, even now?

But there is yet another weapon we can wield in the fight against discouragement. For we are not only to look back at God's faithful promises, or even to look around us at the presence of Christ in His Church. No, in Haggai's time, God also told His people to look toward the future. Yes, the Temple of Solomon had been glorious. But God said in verses 7 and 9 that the new Temple they were building, no matter how meager its foundations may have appeared to them, would nevertheless be filled with glory, even greater glory than the former one. Instead of looking back to an idealized past, God wanted them to focus on an even more amazing future.

For in that future, God said that the opposition they currently faced would melt away. In verse 7 God said that one day all the nations, all the other people in the world would be shaken. One day, all the other nations, all the pagans who put so much stock in the things of this world would bring all the things that they desire – even precious things like gold and silver – to God. One day, all the conflict and opposition that His people were facing would be over, for in verse 9 God said He would bring peace to them.

And we know how these promises have been fulfilled. Because Jesus Himself came into the Second Temple, its glory ended up being much greater than that of the first Temple. And we know that Jesus has already shaken all the nations, drawing people from every tribe and tongue to Himself, people who have given up everything they are and everything they have to Him and for Him. In fact, we ourselves are part of the fulfillment of this promise, aren't we? Our Gentile ancestors came to a place those Ancient Israelites didn't even know existed to build, not just a building, but part of the true Temple, the Body of Christ. We know that both Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple the people were building in Haggai's day were just object lessons, just forshadowings – while Jesus is the reality. His is the true beauty, the true glory, the true splendor. He is the true Desire of all Nations.

And we also know that by His perfect sacrifice and through the power of His Spirit, He is the One Who has already brought peace. By taking all our sin upon Himself, dying on a cross outside the Temple walls, He has made peace between God and all those who trust in Him. By filling all His people with His Spirit, He has brought peace to all of us, tearing down all the walls that divide us, making unimportant all the distinctions that we think are so, so critical. Oh, yes, the glory of that Second Temple has already proved to be so much greater than the first.

But we also know that all these promises of God will be fulfilled in an even deeper, an even more complete way when Jesus comes again. For on that day, all the nations, all those who continue in disloyalty and disobedience to Christ will indeed be shaken. And on that day, Christ will fully and finally destroy all opposition to His reign, casting down even our worst enemies, sin and death. On that day, peace will indeed reign over all the earth.

So in light of God's faithfulness in the past, in light of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit today, and in light of the glorious coming of Christ in the future, does it really make sense for us to go on being discouraged? So, instead of being afraid, let us be strong and work, building up the Body of Christ, so that when He comes there will be more and more people who will give Him glory and sing His praise.