

"A Camelot Memory"
Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Finish this phrase: "I remember when . . ."

We didn't have cellphones . . . computers . . . TVs. . .

And of course, there is our children's or grandchildren's favorites:

"When I was your age . . . When I went to school . . ." How deep was the snow and how far did you have to walk up hill both ways to get to school?

And by golly, we were darn happy to be there right? Right?!

Now lets put this in the context of the church. "I remember when . . ."

As pastors we hear this often. And it seems to me that the heyday of every church I've served always seems to have been just before I arrived! [It's like going on fishing trip. You always miss the good fishing by a week. "Oh you should have seen them last week! They were just about jumping into the boat!"]

I remember when there were xxx in Sunday school and we didn't have room enough in the choir loft and confirmation classes were huge and we had one every year and Christmas Eve and Easter, we had to have 2 services to fit them all in! Oh, I remember when . . .!

Well, there is some of this going on in today's reading from Haggai. The year was around 520 b.c.e. and a few years before this Cyrus, Emperor of Persia, decreed that the exiled Jews could to return to their homeland and were given authority to rebuild their temple. And it seems from this account in Haggai that the rebuilding was not going as well as hoped.

Not that there were problems with the acquisition of building materials or a labor shortage, but the people were losing their priorities and were focused more on personal concerns and security, personal gain, then on re-establishing the center of their faith community.

As I read Haggai I can hear traces of “I remember when. . .” I hear it when the prophet asks, “*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?*” You know, “Do you remember the good old days? Things were better then.”

One commentator referred to such thinking as having “Camelot memory.” It seems to me that many congregations are prone to Camelot memories, a romanticized version of church life in “days of old.” Now, this isn’t all bad. It can be good to remember and celebrate the history of a congregation, to mark significant anniversaries. Like the one this congregation will celebrate in a few short years (2024)! Like Paula mentioning last week about how this congregation responded to the explosion that blew out most of the windows and damaged the church building, yet less than 48 hours later worshiped in a sanctuary with boarded up windows.

We can find inspiration and energy from events of our past which might inspire us to new ideas and creative responses to today’s challenges. But we must be cautious not to live in a Camelot memory of our church. I don’t know about you but I see our grandchildren roll their eyes when I tell them once again what it was like when I went to school. (And of course I *never* exaggerate!) For those who did not live in that time or were a part of the church during those “heyday years” stories of the “good old days” can be, if not discouraging, a bit annoying!

The prophet asks, “*Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?*” This question is not a looking back as if we were approaching the end of our journey as a faith community! It isn’t a nostalgic reminiscing of the old as it passes away. It could and should mark the beginning of rich and exciting future! We are a people of transformation. We are a people of resurrection!

“*How does it look to you now?*” he asks. Again, don’t hear this as a call to bemoan the state of the church but rather to take a good look. Do an honest assessment of who and where we are today. In light of this I say kudos to this congregation for our response to the Church Assessment Tool taken last summer. 87% of our average Sunday attendance took the time to complete the survey. We were told that is a high percentage. You will be hearing more this about over the next many months along with little snippets like in today’s announcement section of the bulletin.

Back in September a group met with Rev. Sarah Anderson, a coach and consultant/coach that unpacked the survey results for the CL21 team. And the most important recommendation she had for us out of the survey results is that ours is a congregation that needs to *discover, find our “Why.”* And if you haven’t yet, you will be hearing much more about this over the next many months.

Finding our why will be much more than writing or rewriting our “mission statement.” If you read our current mission statement, there is a lot of what we do and how we do it in there. And we have much to feel good about

Yet like the people of Haggai's day we have work to do. Hard work and at times we may question "Is it worth it?" And it is here that the word of God through Haggai to his people is clearly a word for us today.

Hear again God making these promises to the people through the prophet:

1) *Take courage all you people of the land. . . work, for I am with you. My Spirit abides among with you.* Not even the most difficult circumstance or most arduous task will persuade God to stay away. This is just not in God's nature. Over and over the various prophets remind us of God's faithfulness, Through Isaiah God reminded the people, "*do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*" It just is not in God's nature to abandon us when things become difficult.

2) *I will fill this house with splendor. . . The silver is mine, and the gold is mine.* Not only will God not abandon us, but the prophet reminds us that God will provide what is needed for the task at hand. Whether it is Haggai's people rebuilding the temple or group of Congregationalists transforming our way of ministry for the 21st century. It may not come to us in the traditional or anticipated ways so keep your minds and hearts open. God will provide.

3) *The latter splendor of this house will be greater than the former . . . in this place I will give prosperity.* Do you hear that? The Lord through the voice of the prophet reminds the people that the presence of God is evident where the glory of God is found. And as magnificent as the old temple may have been or the new temple might be the real glory of the Lord is found not in buildings but in God's people. That is true today as much as in the 6th century b.c.e.. God's glory is not

in the former glory of the temple but in the new work they are now and will be doing with God!

My Spirit abides among you! Now, in this place and in this time, with you!

As we work on discovering our why, we will be tempted like the people of Haggai's time to look back, to point at our programs past and present, point at our "temples", our style of music and worship. To say "Well, we are the church that does this or has that." Whether this is the 35+ recovery meetings/week or GOT Lunch program or has that music program with choir, bells and pipe organ.

Or to say we are the stone church, the downtown church. As I heard the people off the street refer to us as simply "*the Church.*"

These just some of our what and how's. In "finding our why" we will be challenged to dig down to our core beliefs and values, uncover and name those things that inspires us, motivate us, drive us, those things that light a fire under us! Or as I like to say, "What is it that would get me up early in the morning?"

As we begin living out of our whys, we will have more confidence, more unity of direction, *and we will know the truth of God's promise:*

"My Spirit abides among you!

May we with God's presence and provision, so transform the church in our day that someday in future, people will look back and say, "I remember when . . .!"

May it truly be so!