

“The Way”

by Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage

Sunday, November 10, 2019 (Stewardship Sunday)

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and faithful unto you, for you are our rock and our redeemer.

Our Old and New Testament readings this morning present two very common concerns for folks in the church: the fear of losing what we've had and the fear of what the future will hold. And they both attempt to calm those fears by encouraging us to trust in what God is doing in the present.

Haggai is responding to the people's fears and concerns about the rebuilding of the temple. He is seeing that people are afraid that the temple will never be what it was; the lives of the people have changed, their culture has changed, and even the way they practice their faith had to change while they were in exile, while the faith practices of those who remained in Israel also changed in order to survive under foreign rule. How could religious life be what it was?

Those of us who have grown up in the church in the United States often have similar questions and concerns. Although the changes in religious culture in our country are nowhere near as severe as what the Jews experienced during and after the exile, we are in the midst of a profound cultural and religious shift. Some of us remember the church of the 1950s. In many small towns, almost the entire town went to church every Sunday. Nothing else was open. No school, work, or sports events happened on Sunday. Sunday school classes were bursting with children. Churches had pancake breakfasts, chicken dinners, bowling and softball teams, multiple small groups and congregators. I didn't start attending church until the 1980s, but my experience was similar. Our community dedicated Sundays and Wednesdays to church activities and, if the church planned a

banquet or a lock-in or any kind of event on a Friday or Saturday, those events took precedence over other events in our lives.

Things are different now. And those of us who had really good experiences of church in the past might be lamenting the loss of what we had. That makes sense. For some of us, our experiences were wonderful.

But it's important to note that not everyone had positive experiences of the church back then. Most churches in the 50s and 80s were openly anti-LGTBQ+. Most majority white churches were openly racist. When the entire town shut down on Sunday, atheists and people of other religions felt ostracized and othered. In short, the church at that time was not inclusive, which means that, for some, it was hurtful.

I'm not saying this to tarnish our happy memories, but to point to reasons why change, in our case, is good. We can still miss and lament the elements of church life that we loved and lost, while recognizing that some elements of it needed to change. And this mix of lament for the past and rejoicing in change could lead us to decide if some parts of the past way of doing things could or should be resurrected or if we should let them go.

The reading from Haggai tries to help us do these things by reminding us that God is always renewing our church, helping it to grow into who and what God needs it to be. And it does that by encouraging us to focus on the present because we can trust God:

Yet now take courage...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.

Haggai encourages the people to focus on the now—to work now--knowing that God's spirit abides among them and knowing that God will make the temple great again.

Interestingly, the reading from Luke also tries to focus our attention on the present. At the beginning of the reading, some people are trying to trick Jesus by forcing him to get stuck in some legalistic questions about the afterlife. We might sometimes have similar questions: Who, exactly, will we be reunited with in heaven? How, exactly, will that work? What if we had multiple spouses? Do we become reunited with all of them?

Again, all sorts of future-oriented questions come up in the church, especially now when main-line churches across the country are losing membership. What will happen to us? Will the church survive this cosmic cultural shift? How, exactly, will it survive? What, exactly, should we do to make it survive?

These questions about the afterlife and about the future-life of our church are very normal questions to ask. Indeed, to be fiscally responsible, we must ask SOME questions about the future. But in this passage, Jesus redirects the questioners, pointing out that getting stuck wondering about these minute details of the future is not where our focus should be. Our God is a God of the living, meaning that God focuses on the now and so should we, taking care of one another and doing our best to live into our calling as Jesus' disciples. It's not easy to stop worrying about the future and it's not easy to set aside the way things used to be. But that's what our scripture for today is asking us to do.

So how do we do that? How do we actually live in the now, and follow The Way, as Jesus taught? One thing we need to do is to ask some key questions: Who are we now? How do we think God is calling us now? Who are we to be for God, for our community, and for all people who attend this church now? What is or should be our current Way of being the church?

These are good and important questions to be asking on Stewardship Sunday and, in the year, following the call of a new pastor, particularly considering that you have called a bi-vocational pastor. You have actively chosen to “do church” in a new way, by calling a bi-vocational pastor. Doing that could naturally cause a sense of mourning over what was, confusion over what is, and anxiety about what will be. And so, to help us start to answer those broad questions, I am going to ask you to do an exercise. In your pews, you will find some index cards. If there aren’t enough for everyone in your pew, let the ushers know or ask your neighbors in other pews for one. I am going to ask you 3 questions and will give you time to write down your answers for each one. Details would be helpful.

1. Describe the most meaningful element of church life for you that you’ve ever experienced (this could be a specific event, an aspect of theology, a part of worship, an outreach experience, etc. and it could be from any time in your life).
2. Describe one thing that you need from the church. It could be something general (like love and acceptance) or something specific (like prayer for something or a ride to church).
3. Describe at least one thing you can give the church, ideally something you can do to help make #1 happen? (Money for, time for, talent for)
 - Do you want to serve on a committee?
 - Participate in music ministry?
 - Help with children’s programs?
 - Help with visitation schedule?

Before I give you time to answer this one, I have to add an addendum. As many of you know, about 10 years ago I experienced a debilitating disease. At the time, if my church had asked me this question, I would have laughed in their face. I didn’t think that there was anything that I could do for the church or for anyone. It might be that you are at such a place in your life, where physical

or mental health, grief or massive upheavals in your life are causing you to just barely be able to make it. At this time in your life, you might really just need the church's support. If that's the case, that's okay. Being a Disciple of Christ generally comes with responsibilities but, for the most in-need, it means that you will be cared for by your God and your church. So, either leave #3 blank or consider whether your answer to that question might be that you can offer prayers for others in need.

If you are willing, please put your name on this card. I will ask you to bring it up during our Offering. Please also continue this conversation with me and with each other in the upcoming weeks and months. I plan to read these answers and share them with the Executive Board, Stewardship Committee and Nominating Committee. We will then work together to figure out if we should take any next steps. In the end, answers to these questions will help us all start to understand the needs and hopes of our congregation, while also encouraging us to think of Stewardship more broadly. Much of the time, when we talk about stewardship, we talk about money. There's a good reason for that, since it takes money to run a church. But stewardship also refers to the care of the congregation, the care of the wider community and our world, and the care of gifts and talents that God has given us. So, these questions are meant to help us match the needs and hopes of our congregation with our gifts of time, talent, and money. And so, courageously trusting that God always abides with us and that God is working towards the positive future of our church, we can focus on the now. Amen.

Haggai 2:1-9

Luke 19: 1-10

Reference John 14:6 (I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”)

Context Before Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament passage needs some historical context. The prophet Haggai is writing after a huge upheaval had taken place in the Jewish faith. The Jewish people had had a great country in Israel and Judah, with a temple that contained the Arc of the Covenant in Jerusalem. They believed that God literally dwelt in that temple and that, therefore, neither it nor their empire would ever end. But they and the temple were sacked by Egyptians and Assyrians. Then, in 586, the Babylonians invaded, destroyed the temple, massacred many people, and took the intellectual and religious leaders back with them in order to subdue Jewish culture and power. The result was turmoil, confusion and a massive crisis of faith. But then, roughly 30 years later, miraculously, the Persians defeated the Babylonian empire and sent many of the Jews home. Having gone through a terrible crisis, the faith of the returned exiles and the ones who remained was, perhaps, stronger than ever. The people wanted to re-establish their identity as a unified people and part of that was the rebuilding of their temple.