

Haggai 2:1-9  
Luke 20:27-38

**“God of the Living”**  
1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL  
J. Shannon Webster

11 November 2007  
32<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary

Last Sunday’s celebration was a great one. We remembered the Saints who brought us to this point and celebrated the baptismal font and we rejoiced in our rich past. And we rejoiced in the present as well, when we baptized 6 new members of the household of faith. Now what about the future? What about the future?

In the Wednesday evening program when we were talking about the doctrine of salvation, a few weeks ago, we talked about this Gospel text. Back in seminary we used to cite this when we thought one of the professors had become particularly picayunish or pedantic – “The question we must all ask ourselves today, brothers and sisters, is : on the day of Resurrection, whose wife will she be?!”

Obviously it was not a real question. The Sadducees, those nit-pickers of the fine points of the Law, did not believe in a resurrection, and set out to trap Jesus in a logical inconsistency. They cited the Levirate marriage laws, which said that if a man died childless (and that happened often), it was his brother’s obligation to marry the widow and conceive an heir on his brother’s behalf. Today we might dismiss that Old Testament law, on grounds that it turned the woman into a baby machine and nothing more. But it had better intentions than that. It protected the widow who, without status in that society, would otherwise likely be destitute. It also ensured the future for that family, carried on a family name into the future, in a time where even survival depended on such things.

Even by Jesus’ time that old law was not as necessary and they were no longer following it. The silly question the Sadducees posed was academic. They were simply trying to trap Jesus, and he answered by saying, essentially, that it was a stupid question. He said that there *is* a resurrection, and the conventions of this world don’t apply there; in an existence which has no place for death, propagating the species pretty much loses any point. “God is not a God of the dead, but of the living; to God all of them (those who have died to this life) are alive.” Human beings may “lose” their friends, but God never does.

What is interesting is that there really *is* a question *behind* their question, one which Jesus answered (instead of answering the attitude which gave rise to it). They were asking what the future is like, were they not? “What is the future going to be like?” There’s some irony that the contrived test-case was an obscure law which had once been employed to ensure a *future*.

Søren Kierkegaard developed “anxiety” as a theological term, and Paul Tillich developed it. Tillich said our age is one of anxiety, where our very being is threatened by a sense of meaninglessness or emptiness. It is the threat of “non-being.” Does existence have a purpose? And is there a future that matters? Tillich’s answer (in too brief a word) was that there are no definitive arguments for the existence of God or that life has purpose. And yet we *do* clearly have being, and instead of lingering in despair, live as fully as we can in this time and this place as if we are in the presence of a living

God, and so we are. It is okay not to know *everything*.

Probably most of us have had that anxiety that asks “What will the future be like?” That can be a very scary question. And some of you have been there waiting for a lab report, or a job posting, or a surgeon to come out of the O.R. and speak, and have wondered (before or after the report or the speaking) “What will the future be like?” For me it was in 1992, lying in a Cardiac Care Unit halfway across the world, lingering between being and non-being, far from my wife and babies, and wondering. Sometimes when you no longer have the power to read meaning into the world, the best choice is to trust that a God of purpose will give it God’s own meaning, and be glad that it is not up to you. Ol’ Tillich said that is when we truly come to faith, when we have confronted the anxiety of non-being and decided to *be* anyway, no matter what, and live like it matters.

The prophet Haggai, who spoke from our Old Testament lesson today, talked about this question in relation to a building program. While that may seem mundane compared to questions of existence itself, not so. Here’s what was going on. The Jewish people had returned to Zion, from exile in Babylon. You can read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah how they set about to rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Haggai wrote a little later, when the work had stalled and the old-timers were beginning to grouse. Some had seen the temple built by Solomon, destroyed in the invasion. And they said, “Ah, it’ll never be the same. This is nothing, that you’re doing. What’s the point?” They could not see a future at all.

For them the building program, the restoration of the Temple was so important because it was the very literal symbol of the presence of God. Of course Solomon himself said (1 Kings 8:27), “Heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house which I have built.” We know that, for Christians, the temple of God’s glory is a spiritual building and not a physical one. (Jesus said “Tear down this temple and in three days I will build it again.”) But that was not how the returned exiles saw it. The Temple was a critical signifier of what the future would be like. Will God care for Israel again?

The prophet said to the City Council – “Get this thing built. Now.” He jabbed the ribs of governor and high priest, urging them to get going and build the Temple. “Make sure it is better than the last one,” he said, “because once it is done it will be clear that God reigns on earth, and all is well.” Haggai said that God will shake the earth until silver and gold falls out of the pockets of the nations, and abundance and prosperity is everywhere. (There’s a stewardship image, is it not?) “Have courage! Work! For I am with you,” says the Lord. The prophet asks those who have known a past with God to understand what that means in the present.

Over the years that I was a Presbytery Executive, I saw a lot of congregational building programs. Sometimes they were revitalizing experiences. But sometimes there were congregations who worked their fingers to the bone to get a building built, remodeled, paid for, and yet the Kingdom didn’t come. Sometimes the church even fell straight to sleep. They had lost their sense of urgency. Maybe they really *did* think it was about the building. I will always remember the weekend we burned the mortgage, at the church I served in Albuquerque. A wise elder came in on Monday morning, and told me, “I know these people. We’ve got to get them in debt, quick!”

That's not a problem here. We *are* in debt! But your generosity in response to the Finance and Administration team's plea has been a wonderful thing to behold. Your gifts to the Foundation are moving ever closer to restoring the \$ 1 Million we began with. We are moving out of debt, and will have a budget in the black in a couple of years for sure. AND, the refurbishing program on the building happened some time back. Some folks took calculated risks on the future – that Birmingham was coming “back”, that First Presbyterian had a vital role to play in that, and that we would be a strong church still in the heart of and dedicated to this city. And you risked debt, and staffing for the future, and it is working. When you set out to begin the CDC there were voices that said it couldn't be done, but it *was* done. When you set out to acquire the facility that became home to First Light there were voices that said it couldn't be done, but it *was* done. And now your Session and staff and team leaders are not just remembering that, but asking “What will the future be like?” And unlike the complainers in the Haggai passage, we have people who believe it will be filled with God's abundance.

This week the Stewardship Team will be hosting small group gatherings to talk about both the present and the future, and help us make financial commitments to ensure that it happens. We do have the right building in the right place in the right time, and we'll be building up our capacity – our spiritual capacity, our program capacity, whatever it takes to do mission and live out our calling here. I hope you can make one of those meetings, or respond to a follow-up if you can't. In fact, if you're not signed up for one, Sandi Lee and I will be here at 4pm this afternoon and would love to have you join us. We'll have break-outs this Wednesday at Focus on First. And there are home meetings Monday and Thursday evenings, and one here at the church next Saturday at 10am.

One of the principles of Christian giving is that the giver needs to give. It is a spiritual discipline. We do it because that is what God is like, who gave the divine self to us in Jesus Christ the greatest gift. We respond with thanksgiving, because God gave first. That needs to be intentional, not random, not an afterthought. And the only way to do that is proportionally. Many find that the Old Testament guidance of a 10% tithe is the best way for them. Others have found it hard to get to that point. And when we look at the New Testament we see only another figure, Jesus asking 100% from the rich young ruler (“Sell all you have, give to the poor and follow me.”)

So here's the challenge....

- If you are tithing already (and we have people that are), thank you and keep it up.
- If you know what percentage, what proportion, of your income you are giving, thank you, and increase it by 2%. That is, if you are currently giving to God 2% of your income, try going to 4% (or at least 3%). Another option would be to increase your giving by 10% of your current figure, and then see what proportion that turns out to be!
- If you are giving but don't know what proportion it represents, thank you, and try being more intentional about it. Calculate your contributions against your income, and see what it is. Is it where you want to be? It may not be, so try increasing the percentage.

What will the future be like? It will be good. It will be in the hands of God, God who comes to us

not because we deserve it, not because we build houses for God, but because of love for us and a Covenant made. There will be an abundant future, and here's why it matters ... First Light. Among other things, but let's talk about First Light. If someone wanted to ask you what First Presbyterian is about, you could point to that homeless shelter down the street, and say "We're about that. We're about them."

John Calvin (The Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.6.5) talks about the gifts God gives us:

*"No surer rule and no more valid exhortation to keep it could be devised than when we are taught that all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbor's benefit."*

Last Tuesday, Elder Shirley Narkates and I served communion at First Light. One of your pastors and one of your elders does that every other Tuesday. This particular Tuesday, I took this Haggai passage for my text, and told the women they had to help me write my sermon. In any group of First Light residents, there are always several would-be preachers, so the discussion was lively. I gave the context of exiles returning to a temple and city that had been destroyed and asked "What do you think the prophet was saying to those folks?" But then I asked them, "Where are you in this story?"

There was a moment of silence, until one person told us, "I'm here because my house burned down two days ago." And she began to tell us what that felt like to watch everything you own in the world burn before your eyes. Others began to share an experience of "having their temple destroyed." One woman shared her realization that at 51 she was too old to be doing drugs on the street, her realization that she had nothing else in her life but that. And she said, "If it wasn't for First Light I don't think I would be alive." And that prompted a conversation about what First Light had meant for them.

Shirley and I found ourselves among people who had nothing in this world, it would seem. And yet they were thankful. They were sitting in a clean room, with light and warmth and safety around them, had found friends who cared, and the experienced the shelter of God's wings. They were forced to the question of being and non-being in literal ways, and had wondered what the future would be like. And they trusted it would be in God's gracious hands. And we broke bread and shared one cup, and Christ was present.

God's people live a step away from change, all the time. And God has promised us the future. "Work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts." We have a city to rebuild. I guess we probably best get about it.

Thanks be to God, that we have meaningful work to do here!