

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
November 7, 2010

Luke 20:27–38
Haggai 1:15b–2: 9

NEW OCCASIONS TEACH NEW DUTIES

In light of events of the past few weeks, you remember that Union Theological Seminary in Alexandria had a terrible fire and they lost a historic chapel—beautiful Tiffany windows and memories were charred for a moment, and still treasured. In light of our own vision to rebuild our buildings here—to restore their former glory—Haggai speaks to our circumstances.

You see, we build and rebuild old churches because people have a strong desire to be in one place sharing the love of Jesus, sharing the hope of Christ in the same location. Building memories together, working with others, to acknowledge that Jesus will make right their lives; in the words of the Children’s Message: to straighten up the mess that sometimes creeps in.

Churches are built because leaders are passionate. Leaders have a vision, and they share it with those around them. In this place and at this time, we have a God given vision for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. We do so with our ministries to children, especially with our exemplary ministry to Day School families, and our ministries to youth, ministries of music, ministry to college students—some of whom have come home just to hear the music today, one generation to another. And yes, all too often of late, we’ve had ministries with those who helped to found Bush Hill Presbyterian—ministries of consolation and sympathy.

Haggai speaks to us because maintaining this vision—keeping it vibrant—is hard work. And the exiles, who came back to Jerusalem; well, they’d grown fuzzy with just how they were to accomplish what the priests and the prophets had told them what they were to do, which was to rebuild the temple. Haggai’s congregation was just a little weary. They’ve come back to their homes, and it must have looked like the images we see of Haiti, following the devastation there, or pictures from World War II when cities were bombed out in Europe. They looked at the rubble, and they tried to begin the rebuilding of the temple; but the task was huge, and they soon lost a clear understanding of their vision.

Almost two decades passed and on to the scene stepped Haggai. And he has a word from God. It was in the fall of the year, 520 B.C., sometime between mid-August and mid-December. Economic recovery was slow. The political and religious leaders were ineffective. And what did Haggai do? He preached a sermon. He lifted the source of all their discomfort and trouble. He reminded them they had misplaced priorities. They were more concerned with taking care of themselves than they were caring for the community of faith.

And so they were deferring God's vision in order to pursue their own prosperity. In essence, Haggai says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all the rest will be added to you." The prophet preached, and the Word of the Lord says that within three weeks the temple's reconstruction was renewed. The damage had been so extensive it took five years to complete the rebuilding of the temple, but the people remembered who they were and why they had come home during those years.

In the end, today's lesson is about God providing what is beyond the reach of a struggling remnant.

Interestingly, we find ourselves sometime between mid-August and mid-December. And we too want to go where God is leading. We, too, are struggling with the enormity of our vision. So what should we do? Haggai put his congregation to work meeting both spiritual and physical needs. Haggai put his congregation to the task of encouraging one another in essence to seek God's kingdom first. Ministry which is faithful and honest and filled with hope brings God glory.

So what are we to do in every meeting and in every gathering and in every communication. In every contact with one another, every action, every song, every prayer, we are to be mindful of the task and the prayer of glorifying God. Yes, this will mean we'll get up and walk across the room and make sure that someone feels welcome or comforted. It means that we will feed our children and train them to go in the way that the world will never train them: to honor the memory of someone who has gone before us who showed us the way—ministry which will draw us closer to God and closer to one another and, in the process, remind us of our rich ancestral identities. This is Haggai's message for us, as surely as it was mid-fall in 520 B.C.

Amen.