

“Shakedown”
Haggai 1:15b – 2:9
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The book of Haggai is just two chapters long, so the prophet doesn't waste any time getting to the point. The exile is over. We're all back living in our homeland. And yet the temple still lies in ruins. Lots of effort has gone into rebuilding the homes of the people he says accusingly in the first chapter – rooms have been repainted, kitchens have been remodeled, furnishing have been updated – you've done all this to your own homes but the house of the Lord lies in ruins. And that spells trouble.

It's that last point that feels a little more than manipulative at least to a Protestant like me. Christian history, if not religious history in general, is littered with examples of appeals to God to finance the projects of powerful people. You could argue that the entire Reformation history is rooted, in part, in Rome's unethical financing of the building of its own temple in Rome – financed by indulgences where wealthy people paid to get spiritual favoritism for themselves and their family members. It was a shakedown, pure and simply.

Haggai's got no shame in making the appeal. You want true security? *Rebuild the temple.* You want real justice? *Rebuild the temple.* You want true joy? *Rebuild the temple.* I imagine the argument went over as well with the 6th century BCE crowd as it does today. Religion for Baltimore - and I'd dare say for many of us - is an extra curricular activity. It's nice to beef up your resume but it's not a core subject. It's superfluous at best, irrelevant at worst.

So when Haggai asks rhetorically in the first chapter, “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?” I imagine the people answer it with an opposite answer than what God intends. Yes, it is time to rebuild *our own houses*. Yes it is time for us to focus on *our own families, our own responsibilities – those things that we actually have control over*. That's what we do and for good reason. We can't take on all the problems of the world – they are too much! We can't take on all the racism of our time – it's too overwhelming! We can't take on our underfunded schools, our violent city streets, the poor, the addicted, the unemployed on every street corner.

And yet, that's the reason for the building of the temple in the first place. It's not the physical structure, per se. It's the gathering, unifying, fortifying nature of the structure. That place that reorients the people away from the false gods that are always demanding the allegiance in return for a few scraps of justice, or leftovers of healing; away from those god and toward the God of justice and community and peace. That's the reason for the temple. That's the reason for the church. When the church has been at its best it has served as a kind of mediating institution between these giant cosmic forces opposed to God's will and the people who make it up. Like a hedge of protection not just for you and me but for many. Like a voice of the prophet announcing the end of all the things that get in the way of God's love and

justice. Proclaiming God's healing and help and way of forgiveness and grace and love and justice. Organizing the people for work that pursues those goals.

I think that's what Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas meant when he said that the church doesn't have a mission. The church *is a mission*. Western theologians used to believe that "*the Church has a mission*." They built buildings and better programs to have more effective mission. Congregations like ours celebrated that half of its budget went "to mission" meaning something other than internal programs and building and worship. The local church was to be the launching pad for mission in the world. "Build a church, attract people to it, make them members, select a few to be trained for missionary work, and send them out."¹ That was the theology that informed a particular strategy.

More recently, theologians have argued that the church doesn't have a mission; rather, God's mission has a church. Mission in this understanding is rooted in the character or the nature of God whose primary work is reconciling the world to Godself. As the Father has sent me, Jesus says in John's Gospel, "so I am sending you." In this understanding of mission, God is already at work in the world. We join with God to participate in that work. I like that much better.

But Stanley Hauerwas, the cantankerous ethicist at Duke Divinity School says that the church doesn't have a mission and the church doesn't so much participate in God's mission. The church is a mission. Being on mission is constitutive of church. No mission, no church. Hauerwas doesn't conceive of mission in limited, programmatic ways, but wherever we are living and proclaiming God's good news in the world. And God knows we cannot do that on our own. Not in Baltimore. Not in the US. Not in the world. Not with up we are up against.

Many of us heard what we're all up against last Sunday, in a packed assembly room receiving Betsy Nix's presentation on how Baltimore got to be Baltimore. Her presentation was a summary of the history white supremacy acted out in the actual material history of our city. Though Baltimore was home to more freed Black people than just about any other city in America while white people were saving and generating generational wealth in their housing purchases and inheritance, Black people were spending their capital literally buying their own family and friends out of slavery. When the sewer system came to Baltimore, it came to white neighborhoods first, Black neighborhoods last. Some didn't have indoor plumbing until the 1950s. When a Black man – an attorney - broke the color barrier, buying a house on McCulloh Street just a few blocks from here, the Confederates who lived here in this neighborhood, led by their leader who lived one block from our church, passed a city ordinance to "stop the negro invasion" and prohibit Black people from being able to buy houses on a white block. When the Supreme Court struck that down, Baltimore – forever the innovator in new forms of racial segregation – added racial covenants to the deeds of homes in Guilford, Homeland, Roland Park, Rodgers Forge and other all-white neighborhoods stipulating that a homeowner could not legally sell their home to a person of non-white descent. When laborers flocked to

¹ For a great summary of these three models of mission see Miguel Labrador's blog

Baltimore during WWII, swelling all neighborhoods and expanding the housing stock for white people, the city refused to expand housing for Black people forcing a housing crisis that led to a health crisis. Black people not only suffered much higher incidences of preventable diseases but these higher health incidences were used as further evidence for why Black people should not be allowed to expand into white areas. In other words, Black people not only suffered because of white supremacy, but then were blamed for their own ill conditions, a situation that continues today every time I hear someone blame Baltimore for its troubled schools or its troubled streets as if those things emerged out of the ether and not out racist policies, systems, and beliefs created by racism.²

And yet last Sunday, when the question turned to, “so then what are we to do?” nobody offered the church as a prescription for our troubles. I know I didn’t. I wanted to hear about policy prescriptions. Reparations. Kirwan Commission education funding. Economic development. Jobs. All things that we immediately jump to as if any of us has a chance of enacting any of those things without a people who are equipped to take on these vast, death-dealing forces in the world. People so formed in their call to be justice-bearers, and gospel proclaimers, and spiritual agitators that we have half a chance to go toe to toe with these white supremacist demons that have infected every corner of our country’s systems, and many of our hearts as well.

We need the church to stay true to our calling, otherwise we all go to our paneled houses, stick to our little worlds of our making, and yell at cable news, or numb ourselves out on Netflix because there’s nothing little old me can do.

Haggai makes the audacious claim that if you want justice and peace and wellbeing, and forgiveness and reconciliation, then you have to have the temple. The claim is no less audacious today. At a time when religion is in full decline. If you want to take on the biggest forces that have tanked our city, scarred it with racism, underperforming schools, inequity and division, you must have a spiritual center to ground you in your calling.

The city needs this church to be strong just as surely as Haggai’s Israel needed its temple. The city needs the news of the resurrection God who brings life out of death. Not just another program. Not simply another policy prescription. Not just another isolated action, but a whole way of living and being together that is different from what we routinely see in our city. You and I need it, too. A way of living together that makes room for each other’s differences instead of trying to stamp them out. A way of living together that doesn’t recreate the old world of enforcing one culture over and against another, but creates a new culture together instead. A way of struggling together that is marked not by ideological purity, but by the gracious forgiveness of God that enables us to move forward motivated by justice instead of by guilt. A way of being together marked by the deepest kind of sharing that we can imagine – not just our time, not just our money, but our hopes, our dreams, our grief and our burdens.

² Antero Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher), 2010.

When you build that together, Haggai says, then you have a chance to be the nation God wants you to become. So get to work. Share what God has entrusted to you. Steward the community that you inherited. And see what God will do with you and me, with us together.