

“House of Glory”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
November 6, 2022

Friends in Christ....

I think that most, if not all of us, wonder what will heaven be like? Will it have streets of gold? Will being there be anything like it is on earth? Jesus said that there are many rooms for all who arrive. Will we have recognizable bodies? What does it mean to live in God’s presence?

Our gospel text from Luke has a question about heaven, and we will hear that shortly. First, we turn to our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Haggai. Haggai is one of the so-called minor prophets. It is only two chapters long, so it is an easy read and hard to find without using the index. The Book is a collection of brief messages that came from the Lord through the prophet Haggai in 520 BC. We know nothing of the prophet himself, other than his ministry occupied mid-August to mid-December. The people had returned from exile and had lived in Jerusalem for some years, but the Temple still laid in ruins. The messages urge the leaders of the people to rebuild the Temple, and the Lord promised prosperity and peace in the future for a renewed and purified people.

In contrast to the scarcity and punishing climatic scenario described in the first chapter of Haggai, the following passage offers hope for the future. Haggai offered encouraging words by looking to the past as a sign of things to come. What is to come is an even more glorious home for God. Hear these positive words from the prophet Haggai:

Old Testament Lesson Haggai 1:15b-2:9 (CEB)

¹⁵ in the second year of Darius the king.

Encouraging the people

2 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the LORD’s word came through Haggai the prophet: ²Say to Judah’s governor Zerubbabel, Shealtiel’s son, and to the chief priest Joshua, Jehozadak’s son, and to the rest of the people:

³ Who among you is left who saw this house in its former glory?

How does it look to you now?

Does not it appear as nothing to you?

⁴ So now, be strong, Zerubbabel, says the LORD.

Be strong, High Priest Joshua, Jehozadak's son,
and be strong, all you people of the land, says the LORD.

Work, for I am with you, says the LORD of heavenly forces.

⁵As with our agreement when you came out of Egypt,
my spirit stands in your midst.

Do not fear.

⁶This is what the LORD of heavenly forces says:

In just a little while, I will make the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the dry
land quake.

⁷I will make all the nations quake.

The wealth of all the nations will come.

I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of heavenly forces.

⁸The silver and the gold belong to me, says the LORD of heavenly forces.

⁹This house will be more glorious than its predecessor, says the LORD of
heavenly forces.

I will provide prosperity in this place, says the LORD of heavenly forces.

The word of the Lord.

The exiled Judeans, who were mainly their descendants, returned to Jerusalem and set about the difficult work of rebuilding the destroyed city. It was not a wholly peaceful time as the returnees had conflict with those who had remained among the rubble along with those who moved in during the interim. One source of conflict was the rebuilding of the Temple. In the first chapter of Haggai, some of the recently returned people suggested that the temple rebuilding was moving too fast – that they could not yet afford it. Haggai reminded the people in a fiery oracle reminds them that they have homes and are quickly accumulating wealth. Surely, they must have something for their God also. Haggai argues that the work on the temple should start right away.

Another complaint was that the rebuilt temple was not nearly as glorious as was Solomon's temple. The grieving people had forgotten just who fills the temple with glory. It is not Solomon or the many hallowed treasures. It is the living God who is with the people. As long as that God is with God's people, we can confidently expect new things no eye has ever seen before. So Haggai insists that the Lord who has done mighty things in the past can establish new symbols of the Lord's presence in the future. The One who rules the past, present, and future can

reveal himself in ways not yet imagined or anticipated. Yet the future that Haggai lays out is almost unimaginable. Haggai promises that someday, all nations will finally come with their offerings to the Lord of Hosts.

By the tone of the prophet, the work was discouraging. Haggai invites the senior citizens who remembered Solomon's Temple, destroyed sixty-seven years before, to compare it to the present construction project. Naturally, the present project could not measure up to Solomon's Temple. Besides being underfinanced, the Second Temple did not contain the Ark of the Covenant protected by carved cherubim, the stone tablets, the molten sea, or any of the original artifacts of ancient Israel.

Nevertheless, Haggai says, Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant people should "take courage" and continue to "work, for I am with you" (Haggai 2:4) and because, the LORD says, "My spirit abides among you; do not fear" (2:5b).

In Haggai, the LORD promises to be near, this time *in* the believers' work.

The assurance of divine presence is the gospel promise of this passage. Haggai assured his contemporaries that the LORD was present in their labor, blessing it with God's own spirit. The positive results of their labor were assured even if, in the middle of their tasks, the building looked a little cockeyed and less than splendid.

Might we not make that bold claim for our labors? Whatever it is to which God has called us, whatever our projects and tasks, and no matter how less than splendid our efforts may look to our critical eye today, work done by the people of God is always done with the promise of glory. And sometimes — not always, but once in a graceful while — we get to see a glimmer of that glory. Sometimes we are permitted to see God at work through us, among us.

Few of us build temples or churches. Perhaps our temple is feeding the hungry or advocating justice for the poor. Perhaps our temple construction has to do with caring for our families or being as kind and loving as we can in our daily vocations, letting God's work be seen through our own.

The good news is that God remains with you and me, in good times and bad, in sickness and grief, at the moment of our birth and the instant of our death. We can rely on that promise as we form friendships, marry, and have children. It is one thing on which we can count on as we serve God in our daily work and as we play. God's presence is with us is the sure promise we have even when our hairs turn gray and fall out and our energy wanes.

Now let us turn to the 20th chapter of Luke where Jesus is being asked a “gotcha” question about marriage in heaven. A faction known as the Sadducees, who did not believe in the bodily resurrection, opposed Jesus. Who were the Sadducees? From the Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible, they came from the leading families of the nation – the priests, merchants, and aristocrats. This is the only time that reference of them found in Luke. Though they were rivals of the Pharisees, they shared in their dislike of Jesus. It is interesting to note that although the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they ask Jesus about a hypothetical example trying to trip him up. From the 20th chapter of Luke:

Gospel Lesson:

Luke 20:27-38 (CEB)

Question about the resurrection

²⁷ Some Sadducees, who deny that there’s a resurrection, came to Jesus and asked, ²⁸ “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that *if a man’s brother dies leaving a widow but no children, the brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.* ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first man married a woman and then died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third brother married her. Eventually all seven married her, and they all died without leaving any children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? All seven were married to her.”

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “People who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy to participate in that age, that is, in the age of the resurrection from the dead, will not marry nor will they be given in marriage. ³⁶ They can no longer die, because they are like angels and are God’s children since they share in the resurrection. ³⁷ Even Moses demonstrated that the dead are raised—in the passage about the burning bush, when he speaks of the Lord as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.* ³⁸ He is not the God of the dead but of the living. To him they are all alive.”

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word. Amen.

The question that was asked was according to what was known as a levirate marriage, coming from the Latin *levir* which means brother-in-law. A levirate marriage meant that it was required that a man marry the widow of his brother who died with no male heir. The purpose of the law was to provide an heir for the dead

brother, thereby preserving his name and estate. The law was also designed to provide for the welfare of the widow.

Given their nonbelief in the resurrection, the Sadducees' question suggests an assumption that resurrection is simply an extension of life as they know it. They asked the question without realizing it implies a different set of priorities and concerns. Jesus' response hints at this distinction. Marriage is a concern for the physical world in which we are now living. But life in the resurrection is about a spiritual communion that surpasses earthly bonds.

Chapter 20 has a series of events constitute an intensification of the tension and opposition that has characterized the relationships between Jesus and the religious authorities of the day. Nor does this tension abate in the scenes immediately preceding today's passage, as Jesus' authority is first questioned (20:1-8), he then tells a provocative — some might say incendiary — parable (of the wicked tenants) (20:9-19), he evades a rhetorical trap about paying taxes (20:20-26), and now is invited into a similar snare with a question about the resurrection. Jesus again avoids the traps of his interlocutors, answering so well that his opponents are silenced by the astuteness of his answer. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the final time before his passion. You can sense the tension in the air.

Why would resurrection be so important to Pharisees and other Jews? Richard Swanson wrote: "Part of it is the matter of which books in the Bible are considered to be inspired by God. The Sadducees worked only with the Pentateuch, the Torah, while the Pharisees and others also read the Prophets and Psalms as scripture, and it was in those extra books that Pharisees found justification for trusting in a resurrection of the dead."

One observes that there is no concern for the widow, the heartbreak that she would have had in burying all those brothers. They were only interested in the male perspective of whose wife would she be in heaven.

Resurrection might restore the physical body and social relationships, or it might not. It might also mend the misunderstanding that we belong to anyone but God in the first place. The woman in the story will also die but is claimed by no one. Her resurrection does not rely on these men.

What will not be resurrected are the petty squabbles and theological quandaries of our times. They will be relegated to the realm of dead things, the notes unsaid. Resurrection does not come without death, but it leaves dead things

in its wake. It does not fret over dead husbands and wives. On the contrary, it rejoices that the dead can die no more. May the God of living continually draw our attention to this life beyond the limits of our imagination. Resurrection is about how God claims everyone.

Last Tuesday, November 1st, was All Saints Day. We give thanks for all the saints that have died this past year, knowing that they are children of God. For to God, all are alive.

Thanks be to God. Amen.