

St. Francis Church: The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Haggai 1:15b – 2:9
© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, November 11, 2007

*In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now **take courage**, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; **take courage**, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; **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**. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.*

In L. Frank Baum's book *The Wizard of Oz*, the Lion finally walks into the throne room of the great and terrible Oz. Do you remember what he has come for?

"I have come for my courage," announced the Lion, entering the room.

"Very well," answered the little man; "I will get it for you."

He went to a cupboard and reaching up to a high shelf took down a square green bottle, the contents of which he poured into a green-gold dish, beautifully carved. Placing this before the Cowardly Lion, who sniffed at it as if he did not like it, the Wizard said: "Drink."

"What is it?" asked the Lion.

"Well," answered Oz, "if it were inside of you, it would be courage. You know, of course, that courage is always inside one; so that this really cannot be called courage until you have swallowed it. Therefore I advise you to drink it as soon as possible."

The Lion hesitated no longer, but drank till the dish was empty.

"How do you feel now?" asked Oz.

"Full of courage," replied the Lion, who went joyfully back to his friends to tell them of his good fortune.

Three times in today's reading from the prophet Haggai, God's people are given counsel to be strong, and to show courage:

Take courage, O Zerubbabel...

take courage, Joshua...

take courage, all you people of the land.

The date is precise. The Bible may well convey "universal" truths, but those truths are conveyed through real people in particular places and at particular moments in human history. It's the second year of the reign of King Darius, the 21st of Tishri, on the last day of the Feast of Sukkot. Think about that for a minute. We are used to the prophets situating their word from the Lord

into an historical context—in the year that King Uzziah died, or in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah. But this is more detailed even than that. The memory is quite specific—a day, it seems, like Armistice Day—the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Or the day when the President was shot in Dallas. Or 9/11.

It's been eighteen years since the Israelites have returned home after the exile. And it must have been incredibly discouraging because the temple has still not been rebuilt. It is easy to get stuck and even complacent; so much energy had been spent focusing on coming home but now that they are home they have to rediscover that you need to be careful about what you pray for. Being home doesn't make life simple or easy for them. And they are feeling discouraged about that work. So the Word of the Lord through Haggai is a word of encouragement. Take courage! Be strong; God is with you, so don't be afraid! Now get to work! Courage, it seems, unleashes energy for mission—for action—for doing what the Lord requires.

I have been reflecting a lot this fall—maybe it's just the season in my own life and coming into middle age. I've been thinking about ten years of ministry here at St. Francis. And I've been thinking about what it is to be teaching undergrads at Assumption College, wondering what difference it all makes. And I've been thinking about what it's like to be a dad and watch your kids growing up faster than you thought possible.

It isn't like I'm having these amazing epiphanies or anything. It's not some radically new insight I'm getting. It's more of a kind of assurance, or maybe just a reminder, that what we do here really does matter for the sake of the world—and for our own sakes, too, but that it isn't always about the big things but the small stuff and the day-to-day stuff and the relationships we either tend to, or neglect.

I've been thinking a lot about community this fall. Not community in general, but quite concretely and specifically about *this* faith community on *this* November day. By now I feel I know its flaws and shortcomings as well as anyone. But I have come to see even those shortcomings more and more through the eyes of love. I've ridden the waves of both joy and sadness in this place that my family calls “home” I find myself profoundly grateful for the saints who have come into my life here. I'm not naïve about the challenges we face, but at the same time I find myself overcome by hope.

Faith isn't something static; a creed to be memorized (or worse still) a slogan or cliché. Faith is above all else trust: deep trust that God knows what God is doing and that God really does love us. And from that trust, it seems to me, comes an awareness that we need to trust each other if we are to accomplish great things together—we need to trust in our own giftedness and in the giftedness of others. We won't get it right all of the time to be sure. But in order to really trust like that, we need courage. That is the word I hear on this eleventh day of this eleventh month of the year of our Lord 2007—all of this from a prophet who lived 2500 years ago!

The “courage to be”—Paul Tillich once wrote—is itself a sign of God's presence in our midst. In fact he wrote those words almost at exactly the same time this congregation was being founded in the early 1950s, at a time he called “an age of anxiety.” (If I could go back and talk with him in 1952 I'd say, “Paul, you ain't seen nothin' yet!”)

But of course it really was a time of great anxiety. We tend to filter our memories through some old episode of “Father Knows Best.” But in hindsight it’s pretty obvious that the certitudes of that era were coming unglued pretty quickly—the role of women at home and in the workplace was being challenged, the Civil Rights movement was just over the horizon and the Cold War was in high gear, with the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki too scary to ponder.

But in the face of anxiety and fear, we can choose courage. That’s what Tillich’s book is about but it wasn’t a new thought—it’s a thought that goes back to the very heart of what it means to claim humans are created in the image of God. The courage to be, the courage to stand, the courage to act, the courage to persevere, the courage to rebuild the temple or the church or the towers—all of these are signs of God’s presence in our midst. The courage to be alive in the face of death and the courage to love in the face of hate—these are outward and visible signs of God’s eternal presence in our midst and sure and certain signs of God’s Kingdom breaking in for those who have eyes to see.

I have come to believe, therefore, that one of the most important things we can do for one another in Christian community is to encourage one another. And conversely, one of the things that destroys community is when we sow the seeds of discouragement.

Back to that “cowardly lion”—the truth is that he was never really as cowardly as he thought he was. He mistakenly believed that courage was about not being afraid. But the fact is that true courage is about acting *in spite of* our fears. True courage is about facing our fears and still being strong. His friends saw bravery in him that he couldn’t see in himself—at least not until he had an outward and visible sign of it by drinking that strange elixir. In the film as you probably remember it’s a medal; but I prefer Baum’s original metaphor. Maybe it’s not even a stretch to think of it as sharing the cup of salvation, the wine we pour at this table each week and the bread we break that give us what we need to find courage, and faith, and hope, and love, for the journey.

We are already Christ’s own. We have been claimed and sealed and marked and loved from before our births. We are already the Body and Blood of Christ as we come together: two or three, or thirty or sixty or a hundred at a time. We are already the Body of Christ but we need reminders—we need signs. We need to get that “elixir” inside of our bodies so that it can become courage in our day-to-day lives.

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.