

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
November 6, 2022
Year C, 22 Pentecost, Proper 27
All Saints' – Holy Baptism – Commitment Sunday
A Sacramental Church
The Rev. Leyla King

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Luke 20:27-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The scriptures assigned for today seem providentially suited for the last day of our stewardship season. We are looking forward to 2023 when we hope to finally complete renovations on this beautiful sanctuary, even as we begin paying back the loan that makes those renovations possible. And from ancient times, the prophet Haggai encourages God's faithful people to commit their time and effort and money to renovating and rebuilding their place of worship. Haggai has just about done this preacher's work for her!

The prophet speaks to a remnant of the ancient kingdom of Israel who, over a generation, have survived a harrowing and traumatic exile in Babylon and have chosen to return to their native land. They've done the first tasks of building back the basic necessities: homes to live in and farms and livestock for food. But others in the community have done more than the basics: they've added luxury to their homes and hoarded what they've raised or earned. And all the while, the Temple, that symbol of their faith in God and the heart of their community, destroyed by the Babylonians long ago, is still a shambles. The community has rebuilt it – sort of – but they've not given the same attention to it as they have to their own dwellings. They have come through the worst of the crisis of the exile but are still hyper-focused on just their private needs.

Now, don't get Haggai wrong. Despite the somewhat greedy-sounding God at the end of these verses, the prophet is not suggesting that the people spend lavishly on the Temple to the detriment of their own well-being. But God's possessiveness here (when God says, "the silver is mine and the gold is mine") is a good reminder that such wealth is definitely *not* ours. That the bounty of the earth, the treasure that we accumulate, have their source in the "Lord of hosts" who provides all.

And so Haggai points out that when the people spend so much time and energy and money on their individual dwelling-places and ignore God's dwelling-place on earth, they have failed to order things well. They have prioritized their own desires over God's desires for them, their own well-being over the well-being of the whole worshipping community.

Of course, the situation in ancient Israel isn't exactly comparable to 21st century Chattanooga. Aside from the more obvious differences, in many ways, we are not yet on the other side of our crisis-times as Haggai's audience was. Inflation continues to climb right alongside interest rates with no end in sight. And if we have any kind of variable debt, or live on a fixed income, or are providing for a family, the threat of economic uncertainty at best and outright crisis at worst seems to loom. Given those circumstances, it might seem frightening to even consider making a commitment to use our money in any way other than for our own family's pressing needs.

But even given today's uncertainties, Haggai's words still carry meaning for us because they remind us of a number of important tenets of our faith: That "the silver" and "the gold" are God's – not

ours. That the source of all we have is to be found in the Lord of hosts. And that the work of building up the church – both the physical structure and the community that worships there – must always remain among our top priorities because that is sacramental work.

I know you'll remember from your regular study of our catechism that sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. So, in a minute, when we baptize Ava and Atlas, through the visible signs of water and oil, we show outwardly what is already true spiritually – that the Stone twins, like all of us, are beloved children of God.

And both this building and the community that gathers regularly within its walls are also sacraments of a kind. The building is a sacrament because, like the Temple in ancient Israel, it stands as a symbol of the grace of God's presence in our lives. When we care for and maintain it and (hopefully!) renovate it to better serve Christ's mission through Thankful, we make outward and visible what we know to already be true: that as we work to build God's church, the Lord is with us, just as God was with Israel.

And this community, all of us gathered today and the many who couldn't be here, we, too, are a sacrament. Together, we discern God's call for us and live into that divine vision of who God wills for us to be in this time and place. Through our love for one another, through our outreach to the communities around us, even and especially in precarious economic times, God's love is made known. *We* are the outward and visible signs of the spiritual grace that is God's love for all. When, together, nourished by each other and by our worship in this beautiful space, we live into that calling, we are made sacred, "through the sanctification by the Spirit," as second Thessalonians puts it. Or, said another way, we take up our rightful place in the communion of saints, that whole congregation of God's beloved people who continue to live in God's love outside of this time and place.

It is to that heavenly communion that Jesus points when fellow Jews of a certain sect ask him a question about a widow married seven times. Behind the Sadducees' question is a challenge to Jesus' insistence on the truth of resurrection, a mysterious truth to which Jesus remains steadfast in the face of their questions. The "children of the resurrection," Jesus says, are alive even now in a new and wholly different eternal life with God. This is the communion of saints of which we are all part.

Today, we baptize Ava and Atlas into that life, which is surely something to celebrate. Today, we also remember our own baptisms and acknowledge the work of sanctification that God's Spirit has already done and continues to do in our lives. And today, we commit all that we can to the building up of God's Church in its particular form here at Thankful. In doing so, we participate in the sacramental work of making God's presence, grace and love visible to all. And, we trust, that what the Lord said to God's people in ancient times holds true for us still: "Take courage, all you people [...] work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts." Amen.