

November 11, 2007 “This Marathon of Hope” Haggai 2:1-9
24th After Pentecost
Remembrance Sunday

I’ve been preaching on Remembrance Sunday for over 20 years and still find it one of the more difficult Sunday’s to know what to say.

As a child of the post war, I did not live through the wars and as a Canadian for fifty years, war is something that happens to other people in other lands.

In talking with members of my congregations through the years I have learned from those who have lived through war. I have learned of incredible sacrifice; horrific sights and sounds; and the deep connectedness that comes when you have lived through war together. I have learned from others how war changes your life forever and how for many returning to civilian life was so difficult.

In the stories we have heard from parents, grandparents, some of these shared in the pictures and letters brought in for our worship service today, we learn a little of something that few of us now know firsthand.

Lest we forget.

The book of Haggai on first glance seems like a strange text to preach from on this Remembrance Sunday. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible, two chapters, and not exactly a household name.

Haggai writes in a conflicted time in the history of the Israelite people. The previous generation has lived through the destruction of Jerusalem. All that they have held near and dear has been destroyed. Their history, their buildings, the work of their hands, their culture, their place of worship, their homes, have been destroyed. Desolation.

All that has been built over the years with the labour of their hands is gone.

A place of rocks. A war zone.

Defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. All is lost.

Those who have not been killed by the Babylonians are removed from their land and taken into exile in a foreign land – Babylon. The temple, their place of worship is destroyed. Taken into slavery in Babylon, the people cry out: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”

Indeed, how can we sing at all in the face of war, violence, destruction?

Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish writer of the 20th century, has said that there are 3 stages of grief: “tears, silence and singing”
The generation of people who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were deep in tears and silence, but were a long way from singing.

Haggai writes at a time when the next generation of Israelites are able to come back to their homeland, to Jerusalem. Only a few of their elders would have seen with their own eyes and lived through the destruction of their city. It has been 60 years. Like Canadians who have been through the 1st and 2nd World Wars their numbers are getting smaller. Memories fade.

Ken Gallinger expresses this well in a poem:

“But what shall we remember?

Passchendaele?

Vimy Ridge?

Dieppe?

Pearl Harbour?

Hiroshima?

We would, of course, be glad to remember.

But we weren't even born

“Lest we forget”, you say.

But I, and my children

We never knew the events of which you speak.

We cannot forget, but we cannot remember either;

We never knew.

What shall we remember?

We can remember:

The thousands who starve while

Billions are spent on weapons.

The pictures of school kids with arms and legs missing

Because of someone's “holy” war.

The fear we have felt so often silently during the national news.

Vietnam. Northern Ireland. Persian Gulf. Afghanistan. Iraq. Pakistan. . . .

“In Flanders fields, the poppies grow, beneath the crosses, row on row. . . .”

We cannot remember all that you remember.

But we will remember what we can.

And we will pray with you for peace.”

This next generation of Israelites return to Jerusalem full of hope and song.....free at last, free at last, they are coming home.

There were great expectations.

What they saw was devastating. The images in their mind were nothing like what they saw. The temple was destroyed. Had God abandoned them?

Their hopes were dashed. It would have been better to stay in Babylon than to come home to this.

In the midst of the destruction and hopelessness, Haggai hears a word from the Lord. And the word the Lord speaks is “rebuild”...start again..begin. This is the heart of the good news in God’s Word. Start again. Make a new beginning. Our God is a God of new beginnings and will guide our hands and feet, our heart and minds, as we seek to move forward.

Despite the past, despite those things that have been lost, destroyed in our lives; despite endings, despite guilt, despite “if only’s”; despite the reality for all of us “that I have done some things I ought not to have done and failed to do some things I ought to have done”; despite all that has changed, the time has come to rebuild, to begin again.

There have been tears. There has been silence.

Now is the time for singing. For hope.

God speaks through the prophet Haggai calling a disheartened people to rebuild; rebuild the temple; a sanctuary; a place to gather with our tears, our silence, and our songs; a place to listen for God speaking in our depths, calling us to rebuild, start again, rebuild; a place where together we can find the courage we need live as hopeful people even in the face of war, destruction, loss.

Rebuild the temple and gather together for worship, for the upbuilding of one another. A Sanctuary; a place of peace; a place to listen for the Word of God.

This Remembrance Sunday we are aware of war and peace.

This past week was the official launch of the United Church of Canada's Two year "United for Peace" campaign. "The campaign, which will focus on education, advocacy, and fundraising, has set a financial goal of 2 million dollars. Half the monies raised will be designated to peacebuilding initiatives in Israel and Palestine, and the remainder will be used to support peace projects that are proposed by the United Church's partners in Canada and around the world.

In a special mailing this fall, congregations and church groups were encouraged to support the campaign in a variety of ways, including selling one of a kind olivewood pins made in Bethlehem. The pins are uniquely designed by a local artisan who was able to intricately carve the olivewood to display the campaign's logo of a dove carrying an olive branch.....

Issues to be addressed as part of the campaign's education component include gender violence; children affected by violence, for example, child soldiers; conflicts over resources, religion, and ethnicity; and small arms and gun violence.

One advocacy initiative that is being promoted as part of the United for Peace Campaign is to encourage individuals to write their Member of Parliament to ask the Canadian government to create a federal Department of Peace."

God's word to Haggai and the Israelite people echo down to us – Rebuild. "The Word of the Lord came to Haggai and comes to us today saying: "Work for I am with you says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise I made you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit abides among you. Do not fear."

Amen. Thanks be to God!