

IN THIS PLACE IS YOUR PEACE  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
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Haggai 2:1-9

The last 12 books of the Old Testament are called the Minor Prophets. And the little book of Haggai is minor in every way. It's only a page and a half long, so it's easy to miss. No one is even sure who Haggai was. A minor prophet, indeed.

But Haggai does have one distinctive mark. We know exactly when it was written. It was composed between mid-August and mid-December of the year 520 B.C.E. It is, in fact, the most precisely dated book in the Bible.

Mid-August to mid-December of 520 B.C.E.—not exactly the best time in Israel's history. 19 years earlier the people had returned from exile. The exile had followed the terrible defeat by the Babylonians—people had been killed, and the Temple, Solomon's beautiful Temple, had been destroyed. And then many of the people were force-marched to Babylon, the land of the hated enemy, where they lived for half a century.

Then, finally, a new empire—Persia—had defeated Babylon, and the people were allowed to return home. But home wasn't as they remembered it. There was still plenty of evidence of destruction, and the temple was still a ruin.

The people try to scabble back at having a life. They begin to build their homes and till the soil. But it's hard, and many years nothing much seems to grow. It is two decades after their return that Haggai's voice is heard: "Rebuild the Temple." Do you wonder, says Haggai, why you have sown much but harvested little, why you eat but never have enough, why your clothes don't keep you warm? It is because you have put yourself first, while the house of the Lord lies in ruins. So, rebuild the Temple.

Take courage, says Haggai. The Lord says: I will be with you as I was with you when you came out of Egypt. I will shake the nations, and this ruined Temple will again be a place of splendor. Its latter splendor will be greater than it was before. It is the Temple of the Lord, and in this place you will find your *shalom*, your prosperity, your peace.

The people had seen the place of worship as, well, optional. “Let’s get our lives together first,” they had said, “and then we can think about a worship space.” But Haggai sees the place of worship, the gathering of the congregation, as essential. The very health of the community depends on the presence of the Temple. For “in this place is your peace.”

Columbia, Tennessee, is a community where there is no lack of places of worship. The presence of churches is a visible feature of our city. Some might say that these places where congregations gather for worship are not essential. It’s nice to have churches, but we could get along without them, they would say.

But Haggai would say differently. The presence of the worshiping community in the midst of the city is absolutely essential. It is that community that assures our health, our wholeness, our peace. In this place is your peace.

Barbara Wheeler, the president of Auburn Seminary in New York, has written an article in which she suggests three ways in which the community of the church is essential to our spiritual health.<sup>1</sup>

First, she says, the community of the church “makes it possible for us to believe in God without doing too much harm.” It sounds strange when you first hear it: How can believing in God cause us to do harm? Ah, but we know that sometimes religion and faith do cause harm. People have been demeaned and abused and even killed in the name of religious faith. Church historian Martin Marty described the last millennium of Christian history this way: “They preached a gospel of love, but they served a God of vengeance.”<sup>2</sup>

So the community of faith is a way to keep the destructive impulses of faith under some control. It recognizes that even religious people are imperfect and even wrong. The

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Wheeler, “Who Needs the Church?” The Price H. Gwynn III Church Leadership Series. (Louisville: Geneva Press 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Wheeler (no page number).

stodgy old Westminster Confession of Faith admits: “All [church] councils since the apostles’ time may [be wrong], and many have [been wrong].”<sup>3</sup>

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* has a section called the Book of Discipline. Its purpose, it says, is to “prevent and correct irregularities and delinquencies by governing bodies [of the church, and to] prevent and correct offenses by persons.”<sup>4</sup>

The Christian community helps the spiritual life of each of us by reminding us that we are not always right, that left unchecked the loose cannon of religion can do enormous harm, and that if that harm is to be constrained, it takes the reproof and correction of the whole community. We need each other to stay on the right track. Because in this place is our peace.

Second, in the church we belong to each other. There is one requirement for belonging to the church, and that is belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. There is no entrance exam, no application to fill out, no audition to pass.

As such, the church is almost unique in our world. Everywhere else there are people out there waiting to grade our performance, or assess our work, or decide whether or not we qualify.

Most organizations in our world define themselves by exclusion; that is, they define themselves by the ones they reject. For everyone who makes the football team, there are others who are cut. For every violin playing in the orchestra, there are others who didn’t make it. Phi Beta Kappa is an impressive fraternity not just because of who is admitted, but who is excluded. Even as a nation, we may say with the inscription on the Statue of Liberty that we welcome the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. But we also are putting up a fence to keep out unwanted immigrants.

But “one enters the church by being baptized, and any child can do it. . . . [At this table] there may be some so proud or so fussy as to exclude themselves, but Jesus excludes no one.”<sup>5</sup> We are a community. We belong together. We are open to all. In this place is your peace.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Confessions* (PCUSA), 6.175.

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Order* (PCUSA), D-2.0101.

<sup>5</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1994), p. 143.

Third and finally, the church community gives us wholeness and peace by helping us hold onto our faith. You know, when things are going well in our lives, then holding onto faith is relatively easy. God is in heaven, all's right with the world. When things are going well, our faith would probably be strong regardless of whether we were much involved in the church or not.

But things do not always go well, as we know from our own experience. The events of life beat us down, and where is God now? Sometimes events are so terrible that I find my belief in God strained to the breaking point. Maybe I might think that there's no point in coming to church anymore.

Friends, I want to say that it is just in such times, times of hurt and pain and doubt, that your presence in the community of faith is most important. In those times when you can't sing the hymns, you let others do the singing for you. When you're not sure whether you "believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," you let others bear you up by their faith. In times when you wonder of the bread and cup are enough to nourish your soul, you come to the table anyway, sustained by the faith and love of others.

A man who was known for his independent spirit was heard to say: "I can get along perfectly well by myself in religion. I don't need the church." But later he had a serious illness. Surgery was performed, and afterwards a tube was put down his throat that helped his breathing, but kept him from speaking. The minister came to visit in the hospital room, and found the room festooned with flowers and get-well cards and other expressions of love by the congregation. The man called for a pad, and wrote on it: "I was wrong."

Old Haggai proclaimed that without the presence of the place of worship, the health and well-being of the community suffers. We know it is true. The church guides us, binds us together, and sustains us in the bad times. Without this place, and without these other people, what would our faith be? For in this place is your peace.✠