

“Upstream swimming”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Haggai 2:1-9*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Five years ago, I was driving home from work, when I heard on the radio an interview with the new conductor of the Louisville Orchestra. Now, typically I would have changed the station at this point, because like most Millennials, I don't go to the orchestra. Sounds boring. But something caught my attention. The reporter introduced the conductor as Teddy Abrams, who at just 28-years-old was the youngest-ever conductor of a major orchestra in the United States. According to the reporter, people were describing his hire as the last 'Hail Mary' of a dying institution. People just weren't going to the orchestra in Louisville anymore (or most anywhere), and the people who were going were mostly older. In fact, the Louisville Orchestra had been forced to declare bankruptcy just a couple years earlier. The hire of Teddy Abrams was seen by many as not all that different from many a church's hiring of a young pastor: let's hope he has friends, young ones!

As I listened to the interview, I realized that they might as well have been talking about the church. Teddy said that all everyone wanted to know was: How do we get young people to come to the orchestra? The same grief that often emerges in conversations about the future of the church threaded the interview. Like church, here was a tradition of genius, of longing, that strived to connect the human spirit with something greater: beauty, truth, the sacred, a community gathered in crossing social barriers, defying boundaries, exploring pain and joy. And all folks could say was what I said earlier: sounds boring.

In some ways, this interview filled me with more despair: oh great, it's not just the church that's dying, it's every great institution of human civilization. Fantastic! At the same time, however, it afforded me a deep and abiding relief: it's not just the church. It's not that we're uniquely doing something wrong. It's that our culture is experiencing seismic changes, and all institutions and traditions are struggling to cope.

Practically every organization that invites people to commit their time and energy, and more than that, their identity, to something larger than themselves, is struggling. It's harder and harder to get volunteers. Harder and harder to get money. Harder and harder to cultivate real commitment, what we would call discipleship. The world is changing, in big ways.

Living in the midst of such profound cultural changes—ones that we don't fully understand yet—can be scary. Like the Louisville Orchestra, we may wonder if there really is a future here, at Westminster Church.

But it's not the first time the people of God have asked such questions.

When we hear from the prophet Haggai today, it's 520 BCE. Nearly 70 years ago, the Israelites watched their country burn, as they were carted off in chains to live in exile. For 70 years, they

have lived on their memories, singing of Solomon's golden temple and David's bustling Jerusalem. When Persia finally conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to go home, they expected a land flowing with milk and honey. At last, they thought, we're free; things will get better now.

But what they find are ruins—nothing but a pale shadow of what once was. The few who remained behind have reverted to old patterns of subsistence living and idol worship. The cities have fallen into decay, and poverty is everywhere. They labor day and night, trying to survive. For 20 years, they put off rebuilding the temple, saying they're too busy living; they don't have the time or the resources.

Then comes along Haggai, a new prophet who inspires them to rebuild the temple. For the first time in a very long time, they get excited for the future.

But when they finally look upon this new temple, they cry. Ezra tell us that the old people who had seen the first temple “wept with a loud voice” (3:13) when they saw the new one. This new temple is nothing like the old one. It's smaller and poorer. And there aren't nearly as many worshipers.

God asks, “Is there anyone among you who can still remember how splendid the temple used to be? How does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all.”

We might feel that way today. In many ways, we don't recognize the world around us; it's mean, and polarized; it's driven by individualism and consumerism; people are tired and overworked; and there are real threats to our existence.

Worshiping at Westminster can feel like worshiping in the remnants of a once splendid temple: empty pews, volunteer positions no one wants to hold, and a culture that for the most part has deemed us irrelevant.

In our Haggai passage, God doesn't try to deny the truth of the Israelites' concerns or their pain. God doesn't ask them to pretend that everything's OK. God doesn't question their faith. God validates what they're feeling and says, “You're right. This is a shoddy substitute for the life you envisioned.”

Every person, every institution, every culture has moments when the ground beneath them gives way; they may not know it but how they answer that crisis of confusion, of change, of uncertainty and disappointment, will define them. It will define us.

We can bury our heads and ignore it, until it's too late. We can walk away, give up. We can fight the change, trying to stem its tide, like hands on a bursting dam, like fish trying to swim upstream, pushing against the inevitable current. In all scenarios, we lose.

There's no amount of trying, no secret stratagem, no better sermon, no improved worship, no new program, no people if they just tried harder, that's going to reverse the culture changes we're experiencing. We can't become what we once were. We are not going to fill these pews. We are not going to be a cultural powerhouse again.

As long as we carry that ambition, we are bound to become exhausted, disappointed, and angry. We are not salmon—we can't swim upstream.

I know that's painful to accept. But once we do, we will find in this a hidden grace. When we realize that God doesn't need us to be something we're not, we become free to be who we are. Free to experiment, to be released from old criteria of success, to worship and have fun, to love each other, to speak truth whether it's popular or not, to seek justice whether it's wanted or not, to become whom God is calling us to be, to build a *new* temple—one we have yet to imagine. What a burden we shed!

John Holbert writes, “The next time we gaze at our own temples, our churches, our houses of worship, we ought not to judge them on the size of their steeples, the splendor of their pipe organs, or the grandeur and the number of their classrooms. Do they speak to the world that God is there? Do they shout the truth of the freedom-making God? Only on these bases can any such places be judged.”

Our response to these changing times must be our faith that God is in this love we exchange, in this worship we offer, in these acts of justice and kindness, in this life we live today. That will be our testimony to this changing world.

It's all God asked of the Israelites all those years ago through the prophet Haggai. God said, “I am still with you. I'm not going anywhere. We've made it through hard times before, and we will again... But you've got to do something for me. Take another step. Lay another brick in this temple. This world needs to know that I, the Lord God, am still here. So, go to work.”

The work isn't recovering what we've lost; it's discovering what we're being given, in a new and different world.

It's like how when some people retire they feel lost, because everything that gave them meaning and purpose is gone, but other people rejoice, because they are now free to do all the things they were never able to do before. Life's not over for them; it's just starting.

That's how it can be for the church. It may not look like the old temple. We may not see the purpose or yield in our time. But we do our work, knowing God is with us, using each of these moments like sand for bricks, which together one day will raise a new temple. We get to let go of all the pressure to save the church, to swim against the tide of our culture. All we need do is minister in the good news of God's love. God will do the rest. Even should these doors one day close, the gospel will not perish. Ours is a faith that defies death and insists on resurrection, so how could we believe any less for the church itself?

So let's start having some fun. Let's do some dreaming. Let's imagine what God can build with these ashes. Maybe that's what our changing culture needs most: a church that is finally free to be itself, and have fun doing it. **Amen.**