

“Former glory”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I want to talk with you about a very serious condition that is threatening the future of our young people. I myself am a carrier of this dangerous disease. It’s called early onset nostalgia.

Symptoms include singing the opening song to *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in the shower; still getting angry that you died of dysentery on the Oregon Trail; wearing clothing that you stole from your grandfather’s attic; playing Pokemon-GO so that you can recapture your childhood even though you’re only 28 and still living at home; and tagging a photo from *last* week with the hashtag Throwback Thursday.

Early onset nostalgia is when you long for the good ol’ days, a simpler time when you were carefree—that bygone golden age of the 1990s.

We millennials are so nostalgic that we’re not even content with our own past; we need yours too. Did you know that vinyl record sales go up every year? We never even had record players! Meanwhile, thousands of millennials are setting their iPhone ring tone as “old phone,” which provides them with a lovely, grating sound that they’re told resembles the original ringing of a rotary phone.

I even found an article published by AARP titled “Why millennials love nostalgia and how blasts from the past can help you communicate with them.” The AARP advises that you use nostalgia as a “vehicle for getting to know your kids better.”

So, here it goes: hi, my name is Patrick, and I’m nostalgic.

Of course, nostalgia is nothing new, and the Israelites are feeling plenty in our passage from Haggai this morning.

It’s 520 BCE. Nearly 70 years ago, they 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 tells 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.”

That's the thing about temples. At some point, they break, and what once was seems far better than what now is.

Worshiping at Westminster can feel like worshiping in the remnants of a once splendid temple. We remember how it used to be—the filled pews, the multiple staff, the thriving children's and youth programming, the influence in the community—and we long for a return.

Then there are the memories of the people who filled this church. We remember the joy of past days with loved ones who have now died, and for awhile, sometimes for a long while, we wonder if we'll ever be able to feel that joy again. Their absence can feel like a shocking reminder of the failure, or inadequacy, of God's promises. Life just didn't turn out as we expected.

We fumble trying to put the pieces back together again, and no matter what, the results just aren't as good.

In our Haggai passage, God doesn't try to deny the truth of the Israelites' memories or their pain. God doesn't ask them to pretend that everything's OK. God doesn't tell them about all the other people who have it so much worse than they do. 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.”

God waits as they cry and then offers this simple yet world-shaking comfort: “I am still with you. I'm not going anywhere. I was with you when you took your first breath. I was with you when you felt the first pangs of love. I was with you when you laughed till your sides hurt. I was with you when all hope seemed to go out of the world and you cried till there were no tears left. And I am still with you. 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. Build this temple. This world needs to know that I, the Lord God, am still here. So, go to work.”

Right now, as a church, we’re dreaming of how we’re going to rebuild this temple. We’re pinning passion leaves to that tree out there in the narthex. We’re coming up with blueprints. We’re building up our hopes. But it’s going to be hard work, and even when we get there, this new temple is bound to disappoint if we’re hoping it’ll look like that church of 50 years ago.

This new temple may not be as grand, or as influential, or as wealthy, or as populous, as the old one. What matters, however, is that it be a witness to the living presence of God. We won’t forget what once was. There are too many important memories here. But we also will not fear to build something new.

John Holbert writes, “The next time we gaze at our own temples, our churches, our houses of worship, we ought not judge them on the size of their steeples, the splendor of their pipe organs, or the grandeur and 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.”

It is not enough, God, says to survive. We must cast a new vision and build a house for God.

But here’s the thing about that old temple. It’s not just the building or the programs; it’s the stories and the people; it’s the weddings and the baptisms and the confirmations and the funerals. We don’t want to leave these lives behind. So when we talk about this church and what it’s becoming, we also have to talk about the dead.

Once again, God does this beautiful thing: God weeps with us, acknowledging and embracing our pain. God pulls up a chair, exchanging stories with us and inviting us to remember the lives of our loved ones.

God asks only that we have the courage to take another step in life and begin to build again. We too may discover riches in this world we have yet to experience, riches just waiting to flow through our lives. This decision to live, to rebuild, doesn’t mean we’re betraying or forgetting the ones we’ve lost. It means we’re taking them with us. And as that old hymn goes, “In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” For there stands beyond this world, beyond history itself, a temple made of stuff far stronger than stone, far richer than gold. It is God’s house, and people are singing there. Your husband is there. Your wife is there. Your son, your daughter, your father, your mother, is there. Your friend is there. Your loved one is there. They’re all there.

God—and this house—tether you to them. And as long as God is with you, they are with you.

So whatever it is you're remembering and grieving—be it a loved one, or a dream, or a church as it once was—take heart. God asks only this: take another step; lay another brick; add another stone. And each step you take, each brick you lay, each stone you add, it shall be a witness to the undying presence of God, in ways you perhaps cannot yet discern.

The longing of nostalgia is not a bad thing. Nor are our memories. Nor is our pain. But God's temple, and our loved ones, and our dreams, they're not behind us. They're in front us. Just a few bricks more. They'll wait. **Amen.**