

Sermon

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November 10, 2019

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Ps 145:1-5, 17-21; Luke 20:27-38

Free Indeed

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

We read from a small book in the prophetic tradition this morning, Haggai. The Israelites are home from the Babylonian exile, now under the control of the Persian Empire. But the Persian emperor has allowed them to go home and to re-build the Temple that was destroyed years earlier by Babylonian forces. As a colony within the Persian Empire, Israel is administered by a governor appointed by the empire and a high priest. The Israelites still dream of a return of their glory days when they had their own king, but at least they are back in their homeland. And they have permission to rebuild the center of their religious, social, and political life, the Temple in Jerusalem.

After all they've been through, they can finally see a glimmer of hope. And Yahweh, their God, was ready to forgive and restore them. Recall that in the readings we've heard this fall, the prophets have chastised the Israelites for forgetting their covenant with Yahweh. The power-brokers turned their backs on Yahweh's demands for righteousness, and care of the most vulnerable. They had become self-centered and unfair in their dealings. They were more interested in looking good at performing their worship than inhabiting an everyday faith that led to just and equitable living. And their quest for power over people left the whole nation vulnerable to conquest from external forces. It was a pattern repeated throughout their history.

But just as God had when the people were in captivity in Egypt, God heard the cry of the people in Babylon, and made a way home for them. Once they're back in Jerusalem and surrounding Judea, God promises that they will be restored as a nation. More importantly, the covenant will be restored—they will be God's people and Yahweh will remain their God.

What *is* this covenant between Yahweh and Israel? God binds Godself to the well-being of the people. The people bind themselves to Yahweh, the One who creates, loves, and liberates. What this means, Yahweh says, is not simply that you love me, but that you live out my love for you in your relationships with one another. You commit yourself to the well-being of all of creation. You see each person as my beloved, made in my own image. As you seek shalom for all, you are responsible for the welfare of the most vulnerable.

Later, that covenant became flesh when God entered history in the person of Jesus. One day, Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment. That is, what was the essential aspect of the covenant that Yahweh shared with the people through the law Moses. Jesus answered: Love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

But the power brokers in Jesus' time weren't any happier to be reminded about the covenant than were their forebears. It didn't suit their purposes. They were a people under a new empire—the Romans. They were allowed a limited degree of autonomy, so long as they didn't challenge the empire, but they still longed for a return to their glory days, when they had a king, a messiah, the anointed one of God who would deliver them. The power-brokers were looking for someone with political and military might, on whose coattails they could ride.

It's no wonder they couldn't see Yahweh's messiah right under their noses. They weren't

looking for him among the peasants, those without status and resources. And when people began to call Jesus the Messiah, it galled them. Jesus was a nobody from the backwaters of Galilee. This itinerant preacher bore no resemblance to the great leaders of the past.

“He must be stopped,” they calculated. “If he’s not strong enough to overthrow the Roman Empire, he’s only going to bring negative attention to us. He’s nothing but a danger. And if our people rise up, our power will be threatened!”

And so, some of the leaders tried to trap Jesus in religious debates, to frame him for heresy.

In today’s story, those who wanted to trick Jesus were from a group of leaders known as Sadducees. This Jewish sect didn’t believe in life after death, and they thought they could catch Jesus saying something contrary to the laws Moses laid down for the community. They posed this riddle: A man dies childless. The law says that his next brother must marry his wife and bear children for the brother who died. Then the second brother died, leaving the first brother’s wife childless. And so a third brother marries the first brother’s wife, but dies leaving her childless . . . and so on through all seven brothers in a family.

“Jesus, whose wife will she be in the afterlife?” the leaders ask.

Before we get to Jesus’ answer, let’s fill in some context. The family situation described is called levirate marriage. In the ancient world, it was the responsibility of a brother to marry the childless widow of a brother in order to bear children for the deceased brother. The child wouldn’t be considered their own biological child, but the child of the eldest brother.

From our contemporary point of view, even as much as patriarchy still forms our culture, this story is disconcerting, even to the point of feeling grossly offensive. Here was a woman passed from brother to brother. It’s certainly uncomfortable to image this. Yet, if we keep in mind that it would have been heard as “normal” to those with whom Jesus was speaking, we can see peer the story in a different way.

We know that in the ancient world of our scriptures, patriarchy was the firmly established order. Marriage was a matter of economy more than romance. It was essential for people within the family to hang on to their inheritance, which was passed from father to son. A woman’s economic well-being was dependent upon being in the household of her father, her husband, or her son. It would have been essential for the widow of the eldest brother to have a son in order to be assured of her home, security, and inheritance. Without it, she would be defenseless.

The question about whose wife she would be in the afterlife was not about a sexual or romantic relationship. Rather, it was: Who is saddled with the responsibility for taking care of her?

But Jesus turns the leaders’ question on its head. “In the afterlife,” he says, “we are transformed. We are alive. We are all free. We are all whole and complete. We are all in God’s care. We are no longer bound by patriarchy or any other relationship of human-making that leaves some vulnerable and others overly-burdened, the oppressed and the oppressor. The image of God is fully alive in your sister-in-law, and also in you.”

Jesus, the Living Covenant of God, modeled that this transformational way of living was not only for those who die but for those whom he encountered. He talks about a new kingdom different from the empires of the world, where shalom is the power and all of God’s creations are known, loved, and able to thrive. It is this kingdom, or realm, that Jesus lives, and he says is both near to us but yet to come. He says this realm of shalom is of God’s making, and that we are invited to be co-creators. We build it by participating in “power-with” relationships of solidarity. We tear it down when we participate in “power-over” relationships, where a few are at the center

and others are remanded to the margins, because the Creator who has already named and claimed each person as worthy and beloved.

This fall we're practicing looking at the Gospel from the underside. This is challenging when we live within the context of a world superpower. It's challenging when we live in a culture in which people are sorted into "more valuable" and "less valuable" based on arbitrary differences. This is challenging when we might prefer to be insulated from the world's hurts, especially those in which we might participate.

In her beautiful book about Genesis called *And it Was Good*, Madeleine L'Engle writes: "Compassion means to be with, to share, to overlap, no matter how difficult or painful it may be. And compassion is indeed painful, for it means to share in the suffering of those we pray for; to love is to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable is to be hurt, inevitably, yet without vulnerability we are not alive, and God showed us this when [God] came to live with us, in utter vulnerability, as Jesus of Nazareth." She goes on to say that the stories of scripture help us practice identifying with others, "in helping our circles overlap. And it is sometimes practice in recognizing the dark side of myself, the side I would rather not acknowledge. Until I can bring myself to acknowledge it, I cannot offer it to God to be redeemed."

This is why it is so important for us to see where and with whom Jesus walked. We, all of us, need to know that our value is not defined by any society. It is given by the Creator of all that is. And this makes us free.

Emma Lazarus, most famous for writing the poem that appears on the Statue of Liberty, is credited with saying "Until we are all free, we are none of us free." And this sentiment was echoed throughout the Civil Rights movement. It was not only the African Americans who must be free from oppression, but oppressors themselves who need to be liberated. As we hear in the gospel story of the widow and the brothers, we are all made free by the liberating God known to us in Christ. Our value isn't determined by wealth or by sons or by any empire. Living in covenant with God, our purpose is to ensure that all know their inherent worth and that all are cared for with the same care God has for us. We are free to bring to God any sorrow or shame for participating in the bondage of others, and to receive forgiveness and release from our own bondage to the evil of hierarchies of human value.

We are made free, we are made alive in our covenant with God. We are called in our liberation to love God with our whole heart and to love our neighbor as God loves. We are made for the freedom of solidarity with all of God's creation. That kind of liberation heals us all.

With this promise, let us be fully and freely alive as resurrection people. Amen.