

Glory Days

Sermon 37 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 10, 2019

Haggai 1: 15b – 2: 9

In 1984 Bruce Springsteen's album, *Born in the U.S.A.*, became the first compact disk ever produced and manufactured in the United States, after CBS and Sony opened their manufacturing plant in Indiana. The album was a best-seller in 1985 and ended up being Springsteen's most popular collection. It featured seven singles that became top-10 hits including "Dancing in the Dark," "Cover Me," and "Born in the U.S.A." It also included a single called, "Glory Days," that topped the charts and is currently the official victory song of the New England Patriots. Since the early 2000s the song has been played in the stadium after every home win!

What makes the song so great, aside from its catchy tune and garage-band sound, is that it hits on a theme everyone can relate to: nostalgia. In the song, Springsteen tells a story about a time he ran into a buddy from high school and reminisced about the "glory days" when they played baseball, had the attention of all the girls, and didn't seem to have a worry in the world.

We might not have played baseball, but most of us can relate to looking back on the past, remembering when we were younger, when life was simpler, when things were easier. We remember our own version of the glory days and wish (even if only for a moment) that things could be like they were back then. So, when the music starts and Springsteen's voice begins telling his story, audiences around the world are swept up into the joy and the comfort of remembering our glory days.

The people we meet in the Bible are no different. They, too, have memories from the past which they reflect upon and reminisce about. Over the course of roughly fifteen hundred years (from Genesis to the time of the prophet Haggai), the Israelites endured many ages and stages of life, they went through many changes as a people, none more significant than their multiple experiences of enslavement and the decimation of their temple. For the Israelites, the Temple was the literal house of God; it was the physical location where God took up residence. So, when the Temple is gone, there is a spiritual sense that God is also absent.

In the ancient writings, we see their struggle with nostalgia as it hinders their ability to move forward. When they wander in the wilderness after liberation from Egyptian captivity, they complain about the conditions and they long for the glory days back in Egypt.

When they are invaded by the Babylonians and their Temple is destroyed, they are traumatized by the experience of invasion and Babylonian occupation, and they struggle to worship and commune with God in the absence of their Temple. As we read through the scriptures we begin to see a people who – much like us – cannot see the blessing of

their current situation because they are so focused on what used to be. They long for the glory days of the past... whatever that might have been.

This time of year, it is easy to get caught up in memories. Memories of loved ones we used to share our Thanksgiving feasts with. Memories of children's feet creeping down the stairs, eager to see presents left fireside or under the tree. Those were the glory days, when kids were young and innocence abounded. When family tables were full and relationships were whole. Those were the days, the glory days.

The church, also has her own set of glory days. When pews were full, buildings bursting at the seams, and when 'Happy Holidays' could simply be 'Merry Christmas.'

But the thing about the glory days is that so often our memories are shaded by the passage of time. We don't dwell so much on how hard each moment was, because now we know how the story ends, we know we survived whatever hardship may have been, and often, we have found some kind of joy or peace in the outcome. When we remember our past, we remember an edited reality, a story with all the rough edges shaved off.

Perhaps we do that necessary editing, that shaving off of all the rough and unpleasant parts of our stories because the real stories, in all their fullness, are too painful to relive.

It's no wonder Springsteen's song about high school didn't include the stress of the calculus test, the girls who rejected him, the friends who bullied him in the bathrooms, or the inevitable arguments at home that adolescence so often brings. Surely, he experienced the pain of a broken heart, a crushed spirit, and maybe even a few moments of wonder about whether or not his dreams were possible.

In the retelling, we get to remember only what we want to remember. That's what makes Springsteen's glory days only possible in the past tense.

The prophet Haggai is one of the last prophets of Israel. According to the Rabbinic traditions, Haggai and Zechariah were active around 520 B.C.E. (about sixty-six years after the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians), and they were the last two prophets until John the Baptist appears almost five hundred years later.

When the prophet, Haggai, speaks, his call is simple: rebuild the temple. Speaking for God, Haggai offers a word of hope: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you, my Spirit abides among you... rebuild this Temple, this house of worship, and I promise you, the latter splendor of this house will be even greater than the former."¹

When Haggai first opened his mouth with this prophetic call, the people had been floundering to build the Temple for decades. The book of Ezra tells us that when Sheshbazzar was governor of Judah, the people had begun the reconstruction but were stalled after only laying the foundations, because conflict had broken out amongst the

people.ⁱⁱ Since then, they'd been struggling to see the vision, struggling to understand the new thing that God was trying to build for them, with them, among them. Struggling to move forward, leaving their past behind them.

Some of them wanted to rebuild the Temple exactly like it was. And others had bigger ideas for the future of the place. Given everything we know about church and decision making, it's not hard to imagine how conflict around a group construction project might emerge.

A friend of mine serves a church on the coast whose sanctuary was completely destroyed by the flood waters during a hurricane. The whole building was a total loss. Everything had to be gutted and replaced. Rebuilt from the ground up. As she and I talked about the process, I tried to help point out silver linings every now and then. I remember one particular conversation when she was talking about the difficulty of picking out new carpets, new pews, new flooring materials. "That must be so exciting!" I naively said, "You get to build a whole new building to meet the needs your church has today! You can even do some dreaming about the future!" "Yeah, it's easy to think that..." she offered, "but when you get down to it, you realize that you've got to decide on every little detail, and you've got to do it all in committee! Simple decisions about carpet color, and wood stain take months to make. Half the church wants to rebuild exactly the way things were and the other half want to change it all. Consensus is a pipe dream and at this pace, there's no hope of getting back into the sanctuary by Easter."

I knew she was right and I had no more words of consolation to offer.

The thing about churches and Temples (past and present) is that they are not just buildings, physical structures built on plots of land, based on blueprints and utilizing sturdy materials to hold them in place. They are the physical containers that hold our most vulnerable and intimate spiritual experiences. In these walls we give our lives to God, we take sacred vows, we share life with our friends, we mourn our dead, we cry, we laugh, we embrace, we connect and all of those experiences are held within the very structure itself. At least the memories of those experiences are.

So, when we think about what it means to lose and rebuild the church or the Temple, what we are talking about is so much more than interior decorating. It is participating in the sacred act of new creation. It requires us to let go of everything that once was, to recognize that which was lost, and to open ourselves to what God is doing here and now. It is, in a sense, rebirth.

The Israelites – probably for good reason - like my friends down east, struggled to imagine that God could change their rubble into a beautiful new creation. They were so caught up in the glory days that they couldn't allow themselves to be creative, to let go of their limited understanding of what the Temple should be and to allow God to work among them to bring about something totally new.

Because we do have the privilege of hindsight with the story of the Jerusalem Temple, we know that it was eventually reconstructed and it stood for centuries until the Romans destroyed it around 70 C.E. (or A.D.). We also may remember the words from Mark's Gospel that we read not so many weeks ago saying:

In three days, I will restore this temple... of course he was referring to his body

Words from Jesus, reframing the very concept of the Temple building. What once was a structure of walls and holy spaces became alive and embodied in the person of Jesus. Talk about a remodel!

In the 20th century similar destruction and restorations occurred throughout Europe. During the Second World War, numerous cathedrals were bombed and had to be rebuilt. This process sparked a lot of reflection and consideration about what the world and western Christianity had become leading up to the war.

Earlier this year a fire ripped through the world's most famous cathedral, Notre Dame in Paris; people all over the globe watched online and on TVs as the roof gave way to the flames and smoke. Not long after, articles popped up noting the powerful image of this renown cathedral burning as religious participation everywhere seems to be plummeting... all of this implied the question that nobody really wanted to voice: is this the end?

This church, like most every church, is in the midst of major institutional transformation. The world is changing more rapidly than ever. Technological advances are changing patterns of communication and socialization faster than any of us can keep up. Scientific developments continue to pose existential challenges and new opportunities. Generational and ideological gaps are growing and it is nearly impossible to figure out how to hold everyone together. These shifts and changes make us all want to find something sturdy, something sure, something we can hold onto and cling to for dear life. Grasping for something we begin to remember the glory days, back when the church was strong and steady. We reach for patterns and programs that used to work (after all they worked for us!) and we look for ways to re-construct those same things for this new world.

But it's not working. So, we look around at these buildings and wonder if God can save this temple when it seems like even the foundations are shaking. We search for the right solution that will fill the pews like they once were and restore this place to its former glory. But it is not so clear.

And then I remember the words from Revelation 21:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God

is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.ⁱⁱⁱ

It seems that all the prophets, from Ezra to Haggai and from Jesus to John are telling the story that God is bringing forth a new creation. Where there was once a building which held the very presence of God, now there is no need for walls, because the temple of God has been reborn, is embodied in the life and hope and fullness of Jesus.

Even though we might want to think that the glory days are long gone, this story, this prophesy that God is always bursting forth with new creation, even in our darkest days, even when the foundations are shaken, even when the walls are falling down all around us, God is making all things new.

Something new is being born, taking root, and coming together all around us and we are invited to come along and join in the work of partnering with God in these acts of new creation. We may be tempted to believe that the glory days are behind us, that there is no hope for our future, but the Holy Spirit begs to differ, reminding us that the true glory days are not long gone, but they are yet to come.

ⁱ Selections from Haggai 2: 4-9a. Paraphrased.

ⁱⁱ Ezra 4: 1-5, *Feasting on the Word*, Jack R. Lundbom, 269

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelation 21: 22 - 26