

The Church Reborn

Haggai 2:1-9

This is the beginning of a new sermon series. Quite a bit shorter than the recent eight-part series I did on *Why Should I Follow Jesus*, this one consists of just 3 sermons. Titled *The Church Today and Tomorrow*, it is about a vision for being the church in our time. That includes both the big “C” church writ large and also being a congregation like Crossroads. Where have we come from? Where are we going? And how will we get there?

Historically, many scholars believe we are now into the fourth large phase of the Christian Church. The early church was the period from Jesus to just before Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century. The second phase was the Church in the Middle Ages – Christendom. It began with the Christian Church becoming the official state church of the Roman Empire and lasted a thousand years until the time of the Enlightenment. Third, there was the modern Church from the Enlightenment into the twentieth century. And now we have the post-modern church.

Each phase represented a kind of re-birth of the Church and each re-birth was preceded by a kind of “death,” a letting go of what was in order to embrace the new. For example, in the early church, the death was a letting go of a diversity of beliefs and a strong focus on the need for counter-cultural and transformational living here and now. The change to more rigid dogma and an emphasis on reward in the afterlife was part of the medieval church’s accepting the mantle of political power and influence. Christianity became Christendom which provided stability for a western civilization that was falling apart, but fundamentally changed the church’s nature.

Death for Christendom was seen in letting go of the aura of an infallible church and papacy. This gave way for some to belief in an infallible scripture and for others to the fundamental superiority of a rational scientific method applied to faith. Into 20th century, many ideas of Enlightenment rationalism were being questioned. There has been a breakdown of trust in the value of institutional religion.

So, it is for us now living to determine what we will do with this treasure called the church, this legacy we have received from twenty centuries of faithful people. Perhaps the vision that guides us be like that spoken by Abraham Lincoln who, from the ashes of the Civil War called for this nation to have “a new birth of freedom.” Will the post-Modern Christian Church have “a new birth of freedom,” a new birth of vision and mission perhaps more akin to that earliest vision and mission? Will our vision reflect something like Jesus’ own vision? That is my hope, my prayer for the church and for Crossroads Church.

The Old Testament concludes with a series of brief prophetic messages—twelve short books of prophecy. They are often called the minor prophets, not because they’re lack of importance, but because of their length. Originally, all twelve were contained on one scroll. Near the end of this scroll are words from the prophet Haggai addressing the remnant people of Israel who had chosen to return to Jerusalem following Babylonian captivity. They were released by the Persian emperor Cyrus and given some resources to return to their homeland.

Only about ten percent of the Jewish exiles actually returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. By the time of Haggai’s address, they had rebuilt a temple. It was really a modest structure, a pale reflection of the glory of Solomon’s temple that had been destroyed by the armies of Babylon. Haggai asked, “Who is left among you that saw this house [Temple] in its former glory?” Clearly no one because they had all died in exile.

Everyone who had been alive then, when Solomon's Temple last stood, was now dead. They had all heard stories and descriptions about the splendor of the Temple. Seeing the shabby replacement now was kind of depressing. But Haggai's message was that they were not forsaken by God. The people of Israel would be reborn and that "that their latter glory will be greater than their former."

This passage from Haggai contains a really great and graphic image. God literally turning world upside down shaking gold and silver into coffers of a new Jerusalem Temple. Israel's future, appearing so unlikely to that remnant, would be more glorious than its past, more abundant even than the nation under David and Solomon!

I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land;
and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come,
and I will fill this house with splendor.

Haggai wanted to give the people a reason to hope and a reason to work. He spoke to a people who had been utterly devastated who had little hope. In the Hebrew Bible, the twelve minor prophets were not the final section, but in the middle. When Christians adopted the Jewish scriptures as part of our own, we changed the order. Some of these words of Haggai may be familiar to you. They were used by George Frederick Handel, in the oratorio *Messiah* to foreshadow the coming of Jesus. Many of the words of these prophets came to be seen by early Christians as pointing to Jesus. They wanted the Old Testament to be seen as pointing to Jesus whose coming literally led to the birth of the Church.

What if we turn that promise and that vision to the Christian Church today? After 2000 years of history and change, what might be that fulfilled promised look like? If you could set the agenda for the Church over the next fifty years, what would it include? What vision do you see for the Christian Church now and into the future? I want to see the Church moving to be a force for inclusion rather than exclusion, to foster peace in the world rather than conflict.

Sometimes I think we may have had this whole church thing wrong. Perhaps our mission needs to be more to pour ourselves out for the society in which we live than to insist that the society become more like us. Perhaps the abundance we seek through faith is a richness we already have. Could it be that there is a wealth we only discover after we've given it away? I see us being more focused on seeing, naming, and blessing where God is already at work in the world than in getting people to come to us for the answers, we all will be much farther along the Way Jesus embodied and taught.

Before there can be a new vision realized, however, before there can be resurrection or re-birth, there must be a letting go of at least some of what has been. For the remnant returning to Israel from captivity, the sight of Jerusalem's must have been heart-wrenching. There was grief in coming face to face with what they no longer had. It was a dying to the past and its glory. So, what has changed for the Christian Church as we stand at the beginning of the 21st century? What do we need to acknowledge is gone?

One thing that is gone for the church, by and large, is a strong moral authority. There have been too many scandals and we have found ourselves too often on the wrong side of movements for justice, peace, and equity in the world. The role of the church in society is moving steadily toward the periphery.

What business should the church be in now? Perhaps we are really in the business of turning our life loose. Perhaps it is our calling to give ourselves away institutionally and personally.

Perhaps we are called to give our whole selves away in the service of those who are seeking truth as well as those who are too tired, hungry, or hurting to seek any truth except rest, relief, and survival. Is it possible that the key to all this is our letting go? Perhaps our journey of faith is learning how.

Each of us has hopes that have not been realized and dreams that have not come true. Church is a place to bring our broken dreams and our lost hopes, to engage the power we have to embrace that turning loose and to open ourselves to the possibilities for resurrection, for re-birth.

How is the church being reborn before our eyes? Lines of demarcation are becoming clearer within the church. They are challenging us to choose to be inclusive rather than exclusive, challenging us to be inclusive rather than exclusive. These birth pangs within the church challenge us to be engaged in social change; to work for peace, equity, and justice by challenging oppressive structures rather than turning away from the serious needs around us. They challenge us to see God's blessing and judgment as present realities rather than only a later reward, and to give ourselves to the transformation of this world rather by refusing to give in to society's desperate race to acquire and accumulate.

The church is being reborn, not in glory, but in vitality. The church is being reborn in abundance and with a clarity of vision that sees how upside down world is and means to turn it back right side up. In a culture of scarcity, the church is being given a new vision of power.

This message is a big picture vision of how church is being reborn. The next sermon is "Church Reborn, part 2." I'll talk about some specifics of how we can make this happen. We will focus on what the implications are for us, our families, this congregation. The challenge is, in this time of death and re-birth, to seek peace.

The action to which I call you now is to think and reflect on these words of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

In order to be at peace, it is necessary to feel a sense of history—
that you are both part of what has come before and part of what is yet to come.
Being thus surrounded, you are not alone;
and the sense of urgency that pervades the present is put in perspective.
Do not frivolously use the time that is yours to spend.
Cherish it, that each day may bring new growth, insight, and awareness.
Use this growth not selfishly,
but rather in service of what may be, in the future tide of time.
Never allow a day to pass that did not add to what was understood before.
Let each day be a stone in the path of growth.
Do not rest until what was intended has been done.
But remember—go as slowly as is necessary in order to sustain a steady pace;
do not expend energy in waste.
Finally, do not allow the illusory urgencies of the immediate to distract you from your
vision of the eternal."

Without a vision, the people perish. But with a powerful vision, we in a local congregation can experience "a new birth of freedom:" freedom from fear and scarcity, freedom to engage our world and our church with the values of Christ, and freedom to be at peace in Jesus' name.