



June 20, 2004

Haggai 1:3-6  
**Saving Life in a Bag with Holes**  
M. Craig Barnes

Five hundred eighty-six years before the birth of Christ, the unthinkable happened. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian armies. It was unthinkable because the Hebrews believed that temple was the dwelling place of God. It was the sacred center of their world, their axis mundi, the axle that tied heaven and earth together. The temple was the place where human need and divine grace met together. So losing it meant that the people had also lost the dwelling of God in their midst.

As the Babylonians dragged the Hebrews off into captivity they walked past the demolished home of God, saw the altar of the Lord lying on its side in the rubble, and wondered, "How could God have allowed this to happen?"

It should not have been a surprise. The prophets had been warning them of this day for years and years. They explained that God was fed up with their solemn assemblies and sacrifices because they were not living lives of worship. "If you do not do justice.... If you do not let justice roll down like the waters, God will take away your worship," the prophets told them. But the people did not listen to their prophets. And now the temple was gone.

For a couple of generations the Hebrews lived as captives in Babylon, until Babylon itself fell to Persia. Eventually, the Persians let the Hebrews return to their devastated homeland. You would think they would be excited to rebuild their city, wall, and temple, but their leaders had a hard time getting the people to rebuild these public works. When times are hard, and people are not convinced about God's presence, they tend to worry most about their own lives. Ironically, that is the very thing that makes it hard to find God's presence among us.

The Hebrews had been living in back in Jerusalem for about eighteen years when Haggai offered his prophecy. During that time they had planted their own crops, built their own homes, and made a little money of their own. But the Lord's house remained in ruins, and there was no symbol of God in their midst.

We are also living in a society in which the sacred symbols are being dismantled. The real issue isn't just with threatened phrases like "In God we trust" or "A nation under God." The real issue is the loss of belief in real connections, windows, between heaven and earth. The issue is that we now live without any great compulsion to lift our heads up. And when we lose heaven, we always lose our great dreams for the city as well. Like those before us, we each tend to our own little business with life. We worry about our jobs and our homes, our money and our bills. We do what we can to protect ourselves against an unpredictable future while the Lord's house lies in ruins.

Now our church building is not lying in ruins, but that is not what Haggai meant by the Lord's house. The church is not the same thing as the temple. We do not limit God's dwelling to this building. When Jesus told the rulers of the temple that if it was destroyed in three days he would resurrect it, he was clearly identifying himself as the new meeting place between heaven and earth. After Christ's death, when the curtain protecting the Holy of Holies in the temple was ripped in two, the holy dwelling of God rushed out into the world wherever Christ is proclaimed.

The church does not contain the dwelling of God. The church serves God wherever he dwells, wherever heaven is still breaking into earth. This happens not only in our worship, but also in our mission ministry - in far off places like Malawi, Ecuador, or other nations in need of our emergency relief. It also happens through our mission in the city where our church is involved in economic and community development through agencies like: East End Cooperative Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Schenley Heights Collaborative, The Neighborhood Academy, and the Vintage Adult Day Center. All of these projects are being used by Jesus Christ to bring a bit of heaven back into a place where otherwise the Lord's kingdom would lie in ruins.

God is also dwelling in the educational program of the church, where children, youth, and adults grow in the knowledge of the Lord, where college students encounter the love of Christ on their campuses, and where people whose spirituality lies in ruins can have their lives transformed by holy words.

God is dwelling wherever a pastor or deacon goes to the hospital or the nursing home to hold the trembling hand of one whose health lies in ruins. In Jesus Christ, God has reestablished the axis mundi and created a new means of dwelling on earth. And the church is devoted to going wherever God dwells.

Now my guess is that you would say that all these ministries are important. You probably agree that this is how we find God's dwelling among us. You may even want to help support them and would love to give more than you do... if only you could afford to. Maybe next year. Maybe as soon as you take care of some personal needs, get the kids through college, get out of debt, get a job that pays a little more money. Maybe if the market really takes off again. You are not unaware the Kingdom of God lies in ruins in this world and you would love to participate in Christ's rebuilding of it. "But," you say, "this is not a good time for me to be giving. I've got needs too you know."

In response to these objections, the Prophet Haggai asks, "Will you live in paneled houses while the Lord's house lies in ruins?... Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, but harvested little; you eat but you never have enough; you drink, but never have your fill; you clothe yourselves but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them in a bag with holes."

Of course you have needs. Who doesn't? But when you begin your agenda in life with meeting your needs, you allow those needs to define you. If you let your needs define you, you will never be more than a needy consumer. And consumers just keep consuming because they are never satisfied. We consume not only stuff, but also relationships, jobs, experiences, diet programs, churches - anything we cram into the black hole of need we feel in our souls. "Consider how you have fared," says the Lord "You never have enough! You're putting your life into a bag with holes."

Do not dare enter into the house of the Lord as consumers, thinking that if you like what you see here you'll put a few dollars in the plate. We will not fill your needs any better than anyone else. But then again, we're not peddling religious products. That's because we refuse to define you by your needs. Rather, we insist on honoring you by defining you through your calling - to be a steward.

From the beginning the Bible has defined us as caretakers of God's creation, people who are blessed to be a blessing, stewards of the manifold grace of God. All of these images claim that our lives have a sacred purpose them. And that purpose is not to tend to our own anxious lives. Do you really think that at the end of life God is going to be impressed if you say, "Lord, you didn't have to worry about me. I did a good job of meeting my own needs."? No, that will not impress God. He will tell you that you missed the point of life.

The word steward comes from the old English "stigwierd" which was the title of the manager of the noble's holdings in medieval society. The stigwierd's job was to care for the needs of the manor. All the

resources he held, he held for the Lord. It would be theft for him to take the Lord's money, use it for his own needs, and then give what was left over back to the Lord. Thus, the job of the steward is to use what has been intrusted to us for the Lord of the house.

Stewards realize that they don't own a thing in this world. Not a thing - not your money, relationships, talents, experiences. Not even the breath of life in your lungs. God is the only Creator, the only owner of the things we collect in this world. So the real question is not how much of what you are holding should you give back to God. It is all God's! The real question is what kind of return is he getting from his investment in your life.

For the first three centuries of the church's history the church was often persecuted. This meant that the church was very poor, and the members of the church had so many pressing needs. But the struggling church continued to grow until it eventually won over the whole Roman Empire. They accomplished this by doing two things very well. First, they believed that Jesus Christ really did re-connect heaven and earth, so they talked about him all the time. Secondly, they demonstrated his love by giving to needs of those around them. They went to the jails. They collected abandoned children and began the ministry of orphanages. They cared for the widows who were destitute, buried the homeless who had died on the streets, provided for the poor, and sent supplies to others churches in distant parts of the empire who were struggling. Through it all, the dwelling of God in the midst of human suffering was made evident.

In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch said the church was the "leader in love" in its society. Is that what the community around the Shadyside Presbyterian Church is saying about us? Are they calling us a leader in love? They could say that. And they had better, or as the prophets warn, God will take away our worship. Amen.