

Haggai 2:4-9 and Hebrews 12:25-29

“Worship that is acceptable to God”

Welcome to worship. I imagine in your life there were times when you were more motivated or less motivated to come here to First Presbyterian and be in worship together. There are a variety of factors that come into play in you making that decision. The weather, how late you were up the night before, sickness, a general sense of malaise, or a football game being played in Europe. I can tell you of one day in my life when every single family that was a member and had ever been a member of the church while I was serving in Florida came to church on that day. We had a bigger attendance than Easter or Christmas. That was 9-11. It was a sunny day and people just wanted, no needed to be in worship on that day.

There is something about being in what some call the house of God, although theologically we know that the term is fraught with misnomers, but we still call it the house of the Lord as the Psalmist states. It is in here where we find comfort, security, strength, focus for the future. That is why Covid hit us so hard and continues to have an affect on us. As a result of Covid people began to see coming together in community in worship as not a necessity, as not necessary at all, but our faith in Jesus became much more personalized with worship becoming a casualty.

The time that we spend in worship after Covid became somewhat inconsequential to our faith in the eyes of many. But I am here today to tell you that there is nothing more important to your faith than worship. Do you hear me those who are streaming at home. What we are doing together this Sunday morning is the most important thing that we do in our Christian walk. There is nothing more important, not Scripture, not prayer, not works of outreach and charity, but worship.

Both of our Scripture today underscore the primary role that worship plays in the life of the individual and communal faith. Let's read

READ

In order to understand our first reading we have to understand the role that the temple played in the life of Israel. The temple was originally built by the son of King David, Solomon around 957 BC. So like a thousand years before Jesus walked on the earth. It was then destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 about 400 years after it was first built. How many years did we just celebrate as a country? Yeah, 200, so not very long when we talk about Biblical time frames.

Haggai, the prophet that we just read this morning, was probably alive before the first temple was destroyed, we read that he was an old man and prophesied what we just read around 520. The temple was completely rebuilt in 515. His primary message was for the Israelites to get back to work and rebuild the temple before they built their own houses. Why? Because unlike the heathen nations around them they could not worship God appropriately at home, God needed a home. The temple had always been understood as that home.

There was the underlying pervasive thought in Jewish theology that God resides, lives in the temple. That is why the Wailing Wall is the Wailing wall because it is the only remaining part of the temple after it had been destroyed a second and final time by the Roman Emperor Titus. The wailing is the result of remember what was and that God is not present any longer in that space until the temple is rebuilt a third time.

If you look at our first Scripture you see that Haggai promises that God will shake those around the region and as a result the temple will be rebuilt. This shaking by God will restore the house of God. We see the presence of God shakes the people of Israel way back in Exodus 19:18 on mount Sinai where God speaks and the whole mountain shakes and trembles. But the people of Israel were busy rebuilding their own lives, having kids, getting back to normal after a very very rough patch. They had just returned to Jerusalem, so give them a break.

But Haggai says no, our first priority is to rebuild the house of God. In essence he was telling them that the first priority was worship, even at the expense of having to use an outhouse instead of building that new bathroom. I know that you are unsettled, but imagine how unsettled God is without any place to call home, without the temple. Plus, we are not able to worship God without the temple, so this has to be the highest priority.

In essence Haggai is telling the people of Israel, the present shaking that you are feeling now cannot compare to the glory of the future shaking which will enthrone God on the temple. This is Haggai. I know that you are experiencing shaking now, but the future shaking that is to come is all about the future kingdom and hope that we have in the temple being occupied by God again.

He tells them three times in vs.4 to take courage. But he also tells them this within the context that the only way that you are going to take courage is by being in the presence of God in worship, and the only way that you can be in the presence of God in worship is by building the temple. 25 years ago we experienced the shaking of the world in a way that many of us who

were alive then and can remember it vividly had never experienced before, I know I hadn't, and I've seen a lot of nations rise and fall and been present as those nations rise and fall. But let's remember, we are not unique in this matter. The world has been shaken time after time and after time. And through it all, God remains faithful, that is why we worship.

This is the premise of the author of Hebrews and what he puts before us. Jesus' presence in our own lives, even, or I would say especially in those times of shaking, demands worship. The better covenant in which we find ourselves, demands worship. We are not the Israelites and we do not believe that God lives in this building, but we do believe that we cannot live out our faith fully and completely without the gathering of the faithful who are called the church.

Both the prophet Haggai and the author of Hebrews are an integral part of a severe warning that there is no escape for those who disregard God or reject his word. We read that over and over again in Hebrews in the author's warning against apostasy. Do not step away from the faith, and earlier he even says that I know that some have stepped away from the faith because they no longer worship with us. Remember that back in chapter 2?

The author begins these verse by warning us to listen to God's voice which we have heard throughout history, and yet, unfortunately, we have a history of disregarding. You know this is true. We don't obey God, we don't listen to God unless we can see a direct benefit for what we hear God tell us in our present daily lives. Otherwise, well, I'll continue on until I hear something that benefits me. Vs.25 tells us that we have this long history of not listening to God, including, but not limited to, those very same people who were standing watching God and felt the shaking of the earth under their feet on Mt. Sinai. Even with all that they didn't listen to God.

But for us, through Jesus, we have this direct relationship with God and so it leaves us without excuse. Every impediment to worship has been removed by the sacrificial action of Christ on the cross. We say we can't come to worship because we have been up late the night before. Well, try getting to worship after being crucified. We skip worship and watch from home because we just aren't feeling great, try getting to worship with a crown of thorns on your head. The kids, you know the three that you have under 2 aren't quite behaving well. Okay, that's actually a really good excuse...

Christians, followers of Jesus under the new covenant are to enter into an experience of maturity in which all of life becomes an expression of worship. It is from worship that all else

emanates. Our relationships with each other, our caring for our neighbor, our ability to see all people created with love and tender care by our creator. It is in worship that we practice that which we are to implement in life, it is not a one off that has no bearing on real life. It is actually a reflection of the life that we are called to live.

The shaking that Haggai described took place and all that remains is Jesus and the faithful who surround him that we call the church. We find ourselves as that community with a new covenant that allows us to worship God in spirit and in truth because God has chosen for us to be in relationship with him. There is nothing more powerful than this that we will ever experience. What we are reading today is an appeal to respond with grateful worship to the God who was revealed in Jesus Christ.

With Jesus' sacrificial death we actually have a greater privilege and responsibility and so we have to respond appropriately through worship. You know what happens when we worship together? It creates a people who are unshakeable. How do I know that? For the Bible tells me so. Psalm 55:22 tells us that when we cast our burdens on the Lord he will create a people who will not be moved. What is the defining characteristic of those cast their burdens on the Lord? They are righteous. Look at that.

Worship creates a people who are unshakeable and who have been given the keys to an unshakeable kingdom in Jesus. We see the same thought in Psalm 96:9-10. The command to worship the Lord is because he is unshakeable and so, by extension, we are also unshakeable. That's what worship does, it allows us to praise the one who shall not be moved, and so it makes us as people who shall not be moved.

I want you to turn to your neighbor and say I shall not be moved. Say it out loud. We shall not be moved. Beloved family, we are to regard every aspect of our lives as an expression of devotion to God. Every single thing we do, every interaction we have, all that happens in the secret corners of our house and at work and school. It is all to be an expression of devotion to God. That is what worship does, it allows us to practice how we are going to live.

Haggai tells the Israelites that what comes next is going to be even greater than anything they are experiencing now. Worship is a glimpse of that promise. Sometimes we get impatient and want to see results our way, through violence, through war, through laughing at the stranger, and distancing ourselves from the poor and the oppressed. It is mostly because we are impatient with God so we stop listening to him. Are we willing to wait for the splendor and glory that is

promised? Worship says we can, we can be patient in the midst of the shaking around us.
Amen.