

The One True Constant

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Haggai 2:1 - 9

Please pray with me: Eternal God... in whom we live and breathe and have our being... we come this morning from all the bustling busy changes of our daily lives, and we ask for your Spirit to move within us. Awaken us to the future into which you always call us. Open us to ways in which you claim us today to be your people. Transform us, even now, into the body of Christ. Amen.

Long, long ago, about 1000 years before Christ walked the earth, the loose confederation of tribes settled in the narrow strip of land between Asia and Africa crowned themselves a king, and the kingdom of Israel was founded. One generation later, the third king, whose name was Solomon, took the throne. He was a very successful king—he expanded the borders of Israel, he conducted successful military campaigns and most of all he established trade relations with the surrounding territories. He turned Israel into a prosperous, thriving nation.

Solomon decided to build a temple... to provide a permanent place of worship... a place which held the sacred scriptures of these people, and more than that, a place where they understood God to dwell. This was a magnificent temple—enormous by the standards of the day, paneled in cedar from Lebanon, sparkling with overlays of silver and gold, bronze and precious stones. This was the House of the One True God, and Jews from all over the Mediterranean basin would come, at least once a year, on pilgrimage to worship there.

This nation of Israel - being as they were a nation of God wrestlers (which is what the name means: Israel, one who *wrestles* with God) - they did not sit peaceably under the rule of their kings, and it didn't take too long for fractures and fissures to develop through the kingdom.

As their internal unity eroded, they became vulnerable to invaders, first the Assyrians who wrecked havoc on the northern part of the kingdom and then the Babylonians, who completely wiped out Jerusalem, left the Temple in rubble, and carted off the priests, scholars, scribes and rulers, the artisans, merchants and landowners - carted them all off to exile in the far-away and foreign land of Babylon.

Nothing looked as it had before... Everything was different... Nothing stayed the same... For 50 years the Israelites were separated from all they held dear: their heart and hearth, their heritage and their home for faith..... But it was not to last forever. Change came again. By a decree of Cyrus the Great, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to resettle their lands and rebuild their temple. Rejoicing at the chance to go back to the way things used to be, they return home. But what they experience in Jerusalem is much less hospitable than what they left behind in Babylon ... everything they encounter is in ruins; everywhere they look is devastation. Hope seems absent entirely. The future is unknown and foreboding and the challenge of rebuilding overwhelming. The only thing that is certain is that nothing is certain... clearly the one true constant—as wise philosophers have always remarked—the one true constant is change.

Some of the repatriates, those who were old enough to remember what it used to look like, they began to cry. Weeping at the memory of what was ... and is no more... looking into the past and mourning all they had lost. And those who had been born in Babylon, and grew up listening to the stories of Israel, old and young alike dismayed and distraught.

What are we to do? How are we to live? How shall we worship? Who are we to become?

And into this audience, into this congregation, steps the prophet Haggai. Listen for God's word to us today, reading from the Message paraphrase:

On the 21st day of the 7th month, the Word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: Tell Governor Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and high priest Joshua, son of Jehozadak, and all the people: Is there anyone here who saw the Temple the way it used to be, all glorious? How does it look to you now? Not much right? So take courage, Zerubbabel! Get take courage, Joshua son of Jehozadak, high priest! Take courage, all you people - God is speaking! Yes, take courage, for I am with you. God of the Angel-Armies is speaking! Put into action the word I covenanted with you when you left Egypt. I am living and breathing among you right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back. This is what God says: Before you know it, I will shake up sky and earth, ocean and fields. I'll shake down the godless nations. They'll bring bushels of wealth and I will fill this Temple with splendor. God of the Angel-Armies says so. I own the silver, I own the gold. This temple is going to end up far better than it started out, a glorious beginning, but an even more glorious finish: a place in which I will hand out wholeness and holiness. This is a decree of God of the Angel-Armies.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Nothing ever stays the same. Now as it ever was, it seems the only true constant in life is change... Now, all of this may seem like ancient history to you, and so indeed it is, but the beauty of God's Word is that it has eternal relevance and that it brings to us Truth that is as alive and necessary for us to hear today as it was for those returning exiles 2500 years ago. You and I, we live in a culture of constant and rapid change. This is a very different world from what it was when I was a kid... just a few years ago. When I was a kid, Dad worked, and Mom stayed home, and the job Dad retired from was the one he had started his career with 40 years earlier. Families lived in the same household and attended the same church for a lifetime.

But now ... Mom and Dad both work and most people will change jobs between 7 to 10 times in their careers. This year alone, over 40 million folks in the USA will uproot and move. Globalization is shrinking our planet, and even as many jobs move overseas, people continue to come to these United States from far and wide, bringing their languages and their cultures and their religious beliefs with them to enrich us and enliven us even as they challenge us and our world view.

Church is changing. Church in the 21st century is undergoing seismic changes. You've seen it - from the mega-churches of ten thousand members meeting in arenas, to the nationally broadcast televised churches reaching hundreds of thousands, to the warehouse churches where pews and pulpits and communion tables have vanished, where all around us liturgy and music make worship take very different shapes than what they used to. And that's not to mention the many people who have abandoned formal worship altogether and seek their sanctuary and spirituality in the woods, or in their Jacuzzi tubs, or at various altars of their own construction. The times, they are a-changing.

And then of course, we all know this church is changing. The building already looks different than it did a month ago... the elevator shaft has emerged from the ground, and the floor is poured and walls arise... and hopefully this month we will call a Pastoral Nominating Committee ... to begin the search for the transitional co-pastor which indicates that in the not too distant future our head-of-staff will look very different than today ... We here are deeply confronted by the truth that nothing ever stays the same. Perhaps you will all agree that the One True Constant is Change.

Most of us, if we admit it, do not particularly like change. It pushes us out of our comfort zones. It heightens our anxieties; it tears our security blankets from our grasp. We don't know what will be required of us. And often, when we stand on the brink of change, we cannot for the life of us imagine what the future holds. All we remember is what it used to be like ... just like the Israelites who surveyed the ruins of their Temple and wept for days gone by.....

On October 21st this year, the Presbyterian Church in Malibu was ignited by a spark blown by the Santa Ana winds, and within minutes, burned to the ground. Just some crumbling foundations and the cross from the top of the spire were all that was left. It would seem to the rest of the world to be a devastation, and we might expect to encounter the congregation weeping over the rubble. But in fact, it has served as a transformative catalyst, galvanizing people to the reality of the *Gospel* message. One church member, as she walked up the steps to the cindered ruins observed, "I think God is even bigger now. He's not contained in these walls. He never has been. Yet in our minds maybe somehow we've contained our faith a little because we had the church. Walking up these steps gives me the awareness that God is everywhere... although our building has been destroyed by fire, we have not lost our church, for our faith is not in a building, but in the resurrected Christ."ⁱ

It seems that just like the repatriated exiles from Babylon, the Presbyterians from Malibu learned that God is every bit as present in the ashes as in the extravagant temple of days gone by, or even in Babylon when there was no temple at all. Just like those Israelites so long, long ago, Christians in California had to revise their judgment about what their building did or did not signify about the presence of God in their midst.

And just like those Israelites so long, long ago, the fires in Malibu forced this community of faith to ask themselves the questions that confront all of us... what does the future hold? Where is God leading us now? It seems that congregation has learned that change is real, but that there is a more important One True Constant.

You see, when we walk by faith and not by sight, we encounter the truth that in Christ Jesus we are never left to rest complacent, or to look over our shoulder with longing for the days gone by. Someone once said that God put our eyes in the front of our heads, so that when we look backwards we get a crick in our neck. We are always going to be called forward into a new future, into the transformation that Christ holds out to us, the invitation to live—each of us individually, and all of us together—into our potential, to discover what it means for us to become the people God designed us to be; to fully embrace our identity as Children of the Living God.

The Reformed Tradition in which the Presbyterian Church stands has a motto and that motto is: *We are reformed, and always being reformed, according to the Holy Spirit of God.* Change is a fact of life... nothing ever stays the same and for the world this can be unsettling, grievous, even disorienting. But for people of faith, people who know the biblical witness, when life shifts around us we dare to ask: *Where is God leading us? What are we called to do? Who are we called to become?*

I think sometimes the shattering of all that is familiar is necessary for us to wake up to the truth that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; behold, all things have become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

I don't know what kinds of change you have encountered. I can't even guess at the ways in which your old familiar temples have been destroyed. I only know that each one of us is here, now, in this place together because we have been called to move confidently into the future, to explore territory yet undreamed of, to stepping boldly over the edge and make new discoveries, uncover rich possibilities, and participate with the resurrected Christ in the unfolding of the Kingdom of God itself.

No one is exempted from this invitation. Remember those repatriated exiles wandering through the rubble? Those who could weep at past memories had most of their lives behind them, but God said to them ... I will pour out my Spirit on all people: your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams. These words from the ancient past are for you today: Take courage, elders and youth alike! Take courage, men and women and children together! Take courage! And put into action the Word ... I am living and breathing among you right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back. For I am with you ... Lord of all that has been, is now and ever will be. I am with you... the One True Constant.