

**Pentecost-24-c2007**

Mike Bennett  
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost  
November 11, 2007

**Haggai 1.15b-2.9**  
Luke 20.27-38

The Latter Splendor

“The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.”

—Haggai 2.9

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

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Like most of us, I spend a lot of time driving and walking around Longmeadow. There are many beautiful views and vistas in our town, especially at this time of the year. Some of my favorite views are views of our church steeple from a distance. Driving on Route 5, depending on the trees, you can see it subtly appearing off to the side. My favorite view is driving up Williams street, where it looks stately in the distance. At night the beacon shines brightly. It is truly a beautiful sight.

I think the beauty of this church stems from something much deeper than mere architecture. When I catch a glimpse of our church, it is not just columns and a steeple that I see. I see its history. I see a building that that, along with its predecessors, was intended to be the center of this town's life. I see the dedication and sacrifice that it has taken to build and maintain this magnificent structure. And I also see the generations of Christians that have been made and nurtured here.

November, on the Christian calendar is the month that kicks off with All Saints' Sunday. When I look at our church building, I think of the saints that have gone on before. I think of the early Christians in the Bible, people like Peter and Paul who shaped their faith under great pressure. I think of great figures in church history—folks like Martin Luther and John Calvin, whose vision and ideas still shape our church today. I think of the saints who lived out the faith with zeal in times of complacency—people like Francis of Assisi and our valley's own Jonathan Edwards. (Not to mention his cousin, Stephen Williams!) And, of course, I think of today's saints—people right here in this town.

I'll let you fill in the names. They are sitting all around you this morning.

So, as you can see, there is a lot for me to think about as I make my way around town, catching glimpses of our steeple. There's a lot for each of us to think as we pass by this church, perhaps several times a day. But I must confess that sometimes when I see a view of this church, my thoughts are less than inspiring. I think about the immense commitment and sacrifice that it took to build a church from nothing, and I wonder if any of us have that sort of faith today. If this church weren't here, would we build it? This church was once at the center of this town, but where is the center of activity now? Is it not rather at the shops? If the church was the hub of community life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, don't the banks and stores fill that role now? Have we been replaced by the Gap?

To be fair, I should say that these occasional depressing thoughts are not really inspired by our church—which is thriving compared to many—but by the general place of the Christian Church in today's society. We've talked about this before. We are in the post-

Christendom era. Occasionally, I see churches that have been given over to secular uses: churches that are now libraries, restaurants, shops, or museums. Somehow, the museums are the worst of all. Is the Christian faith destined to be a mere historical curiosity? Are we who persist here merely caretakers of a monument to the faith of past generations? Though I am optimistic most days, I can't quite seem to escape such questions.

John Updike, a fellow Congregationalist, had occasion to reflect on some of these issues when he was asked to write a forward for a picture book years ago called *Great New England Churches*. Let me share with you a few of his musings as he looked over sixty-four meeting houses not unlike our own:

Some...have passed into secular use. All that have not, it seems safe to say, present headaches to their building committees and cost far more to heat than formerly. Joy and aspiration have shaped these churches, but a certain melancholy may fill them. Puritanism faded into Unitarianism and thence into stoic agnosticism; these gallant old shells hold more memories than promises.

“More memories than promises.” Those are hard words to hear, but they are words that each of us need to consider who call this place our

church. As Christians in 2007, we need to ask ourselves: Have we let our churches become monuments to our past instead of signs of a living faith? It is with this question in view that I offer for your consideration one single verse from the obscure Old Testament prophet Haggai:

“The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.”

—Haggai 2.9

This one verse can provide, I think, a whole new perspective on the role that buildings like this play in our lives.

Haggai was a prophet who lived in a time when the Jewish religion was anything but strong. The Jewish leaders and intellectuals had been taken into exile by Babylon, and in 586 BC the Great Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Haggai was active as a prophet some sixty years after this terrible event. Babylon had fallen to the Persian Empire, so the Jews were now under their control. Because the Persians were kinder to their captive people than the Babylonians, some of the Hebrew people were allowed to return to Jerusalem. All of the captive people were encouraged to practice their own religions.

Most of the people of Haggai's time knew something dimly of the previous times of splendor. They had heard about the Temple, even if they had not seen it. But they had grown accustomed to thinking of faith as something that existed in the past. They were more concerned with other things, with their day-to-day physical existence. In the first chapter of the book, the prophet describes it as, "a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while [the house of the Lord] lies in ruins. (Haggai 1.4) I'm not sure if Jerusalem had a Starbucks, but if it did, it was much busier than the historical center of town where the Temple lay in ruins.

Through Haggai, God encouraged the people to rebuild the Temple, then God gave them this amazing promise that is our text today:

"The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts."

—Haggai 2.9

Those must have been amazing words to hear, because the former splendor was so great and the present time so meager by comparison. And yet the Lord promised greater glory yet to come.

Christians in our time can hear a word from this prophet. The former splendor of *this* house is great, but the latter splendor can be even greater. Our meeting house has never been destroyed (only moved), but the spirit of this age has had a corrosive effect on the place of Christian faith in our society. If we can do more than simply lament the decline of religion, if we can do more than consume ourselves with the details of consumerism, then God can do something new and wonderful in the midst of this old and venerable institution.

New things are happening at our church all of the time. Women are meeting together in circles of faith. Men are gathering for discipleship, study, and support. Our children are learning about the faith at the book nook. We are active in Haiti and in Springfield. By doing these new things, we affirm that this place is a *church*, not a museum. It is a house of living faith, not a monument to the faith of the past. Christianity may not be at the center of our town or our culture

anymore, but we can still choose to make Jesus Christ the center of our lives.

“The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former.”

Thanks be to God for the promise! Thanks be to God for this place!

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Let us pray. Help us, Lord, with our grief over what has been lost from the past. But don't leave us stuck in our grief. Move us forward in a spirit of faith and of adventure. Amen.