

WHISTLE WHILE WE WORK

Wedgewood Baptist, Charlotte

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Haggai 2:1-9

Acts 4:32-37

As I was preparing the information for today's bulletin, I had several options for what to call this Sunday. Last Sunday was Pentecost. We call today Trinity Sunday, or Pentecost One, or the First Sunday after Pentecost. On this Sunday in the liturgical calendar, we now enter what some Christian groups call "Ordinary Time." We change the colors of the communion table and pulpit cloths from the bright red of last Sunday, to green. And GREEN it will be – Sunday after Sunday after Sunday – until we switch to Advent's purple! Indeed, we are at the beginning of ordinary time in the church year. Nothing exciting on the horizon liturgically. No stable births. No baptisms. No triumphal entry into Jerusalem by Jesus and his small group of followers. No dramatic trial, crucifixion or resurrection. No ascension into heaven, and ecstatic speaking in tongues that everyone could understand. All over for this liturgical year. Ordinary time. We're in it – starting today.

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Looking at our scripture from Haggai, the people of Israel were in the midst of their own kind of Ordinary Time, although they never would have called it such. A little background about this reading: The Israelites had been held captive by the Babylonian empire for fifty years following the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Now – almost sixty years later – they have rebuilt the center of their worship life, the temple at Jerusalem. It has taken several years, hard labor, and lots of resources. And some of the people are disappointed with the final result of all their back-breaking work. Because the NEW temple is not Solomon's glorious temple.

The foundations of this new temple were smaller, set inside the boundaries of the first temple so you could see the difference! The Hebrew people didn't have the wealth or the credit rating of King Solomon to be able to deck the temple with precious jewels and exotic wood carvings. In fact, when the temple was finished, some people shouted for joy while others wept because this new temple was not the same as it had been. The prophet Haggai addresses those less-than-happy folk by saying, "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? Anyone still alive who had actually seen the first temple would be about 87 years old. Obviously not many were

left from the glory days. The temple rebuilders had been born in captivity. How do you see it now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" Good questions.

"But," Haggai continues, "God has promised. 'My spirit abides among you; fear not. I will fill this house with splendor....The silver is mine, and the gold is mine....The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, and in this place I will give prosperity.'" (from Haggai 2)

PROSPERITY. The Hebrew word for prosperity is "shalom." Shalom. More than wealth. Shalom implies a relationship of wellbeing, of completeness and peace. A wholeness promised by God. The Hebrew people were to look to God – not a splendid building – to define wellbeing. God had promised them something more beautiful than the past had ever been. God asked the people to trust in a providence more valuable than dollars and cents – a providence more vast than marble and jewels and silks and any carved woods that they could provide: God's providence.

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Fast forward now to five hundred fifty years later. Once again the people of God – another small group – faced their own kind of "ordinary time." The ecstatic "tongues of fire" that were Pentecost had come and gone. These apostles were "Jesus people," followers of an itinerant preacher, who were being slaughtered by the Roman government because they refused to worship Roman gods and goddesses. For the most part they had few possessions or money and little or no political influence. But they had one thing that bound them together. Their faith. Their belief that God's love, freely expressed through Jesus' resurrection, would stand with them no matter what they had to face. Today's scripture says, "And the apostles continued with great power to give their witness...and great grace was upon them all...for all who owned houses or lands would sell them and bring the price of the things that were sold, and lay it at the apostles' feet; and distribution would be made to each according to his need." (Acts 4:32-35 translation by Helen Barrett Montgomery)

Impossible, you say. Communist. Never happen today. Not exactly – agreed – but think for a moment about Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. Clarence Jerden (Jordan) founded this pioneering interracial farming community just over 50 years ago when racial equality was virtually unknown anywhere in the United States. Out of Koinonia Farm has come the Habitat for Humanity building movement which house by affordable house is transforming lives of people throughout the United States.

Another example of a Baptist who lived in Ordinary Time is Helen Barrett Montgomery. Seventy-nine years ago, Helen Barrett Montgomery presided as the first woman president of what now is the American Baptist Churches, USA. Born into a Connecticut Baptist family in 1861, Helen was exceedingly fortunate because her father was an educator who believed that women ought to attend college. Helen graduated from Wellesley College in 1884 after majoring in Greek, unheard of for a woman of that time. She taught Sunday school for 40 years. She worked tirelessly on behalf of missions throughout the world, and education for women in the United States. She served as the first woman elected to the school board – or any public office – in Rochester, New York where she spent her adult life. In 1924 she translated the New

Testament from Greek into a more understandable version than the King James version. I read her translation to you from the book of Acts. When asked why she took on the project, she responded, "to consider young people, busy Sunday-school teachers, and foreigners, and to try to make it plain." Her loyalty to her Baptist church in Rochester, was so great that during the Depression, she and her husband took out a mortgage on their home in order to pay their pledge!

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We, too live in ordinary times. Like the ancient Hebrew people, only a few of us may remember this "temple" in all its former splendor. We can only imagine the sounds of children filling all the Sunday school rooms. We can only fantasize about having to scramble to get a good seat for morning worship. Some of us have only heard the stories of building Hope Chapel or inviting the Korean Hanbeet Presbyterian Church to share our rooms. We may still not quite understand just who in the world the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is or WHY the offices are here. We may not even be interested. We may or may not be aware that we've only recently stopped talking about forming some kind of union with the United Church of Christ.

Now – for goodness sake – our pastor keeps bringing up all this stuff about how we may or may not appeal to potential new members based on what our sanctuary looks like. What is THIS all about? Don't we have enough to worry about to keep ourselves afloat financially without having to risk consider redoing our sanctuary? Aren't these ideas just a little too faddish for us? Who wants to sit in a circle – EVER?! What difference can it possibly make to be able to see out a few windows? Please, dear God, after a very tough week can't we just sit down on these long benches that all face forward? After working at a job that may be frustrating, or caring for an ill family member, or having words with someone, or leaving an empty house, can't we simply come into this quiet place on Sunday mornings at 11 and rest? Why do we have to think about anything else just now?

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Good questions. Appropriate questions. Questions with no pat answers. But questions worth exploring as we seek to find out who and what God is asking us to be and to do at this Ordinary Time in the life of Wedgewood Baptist Church.

You see, God is always stirring up the church. God is always asking people of faith to do SOMETHING besides show up. God is always calling out people to study, to heal, to teach, to invite, to talk honestly with one another, to risk rejection, to overcome fears in order to extend themselves. God is always calling people of faith to dare to be seen as foolish, to ask hard questions of themselves and each other. God always wants us to discern what is best under any particular set of circumstances. God is always asking people of faith to rebuild temples – literally or figuratively – in order that people's lives may be changed. How we will rebuild Wedgewood Baptist Church at this time is unclear to me today. What is clearer to me is that God is asking us to work. And not only to work, but to WHISTLE WHILE WE WORK. Yep, like those 7 dwarves who trudged off into the mine every day, whistling down the path, God expects us to find joy in what we do here. Why shouldn't we? After all, God has endowed us with what we need. We have intellect here. We have energy here. We even have – yes – enthusiasm! We have

a heartbeat that is strong and yes, we have commitment. Commitment from members who staff the office, run off and fold bulletins, count money, make deposits, run errands, clean the buildings, visit shut-ins, teach our classes, prepare and serve meals, tithe, host Room in the Inn, provide instrumental music, ask hard questions of each other, organize ushers, pray, prepare communion, water flowers, sing in the choir, and DECORATE liturgically! Oh yes, and preach. We even have one tiny new life, just seven days old. WHEW! Have I covered everything? We have right here what it takes to rebuild the temple in whatever way it may need rebuilding – physically like the temple of Solomon after the exile, or spiritually like the early church after Pentecost – if we add one more commitment to each other.

THE COMMITMENT TO LISTEN – TRULY LISTEN – TO ONE ANOTHER. If we are willing to talk openly with each other, to pray together, to think, to consider possibilities without judgment, to trust the basic goodness of one another – who KNOWS what may happen in this temple? I for one certainly don't presume to limit God's ability to use our gifts to strengthen our community of faith: to assist us as we work together among our members and friends and throughout our community to – as an old hymn says – bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys.

I am, however, bold enough to guess what will happen to us if we do not commit ourselves to listening to one another, to talking and praying for discernment together – even to dream together. Nothing. That's what will happen. Nothing. And maybe even worse than nothing.

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A folk story describes a village where a young boy tried to play a trick on an old blind woman. He captured a bird and held it in his hands. He approached the woman with a question. "Tell me, Grandmother, is the bird I am holding in my hands alive or is it dead?" He knew he would have the final word because if she guessed it to be alive, he could quickly choke its life out of it, then open his hands to reveal a dead bird. If she guessed the bird to be dead, he would open his hands wide and let the bird fly away. But the old woman knew the truth. She answered the boy. "It is in your hands."

What we do here is in our hands...

We have what it takes to rebuild...

How shall we begin? AMEN.