

**22 Pentecost
November 10, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

Oh my! Sometimes I look at the Lectionary and just sigh. What? These are the Bible readings that scholars have chosen for this day!? Well...so be it...Here we go. Stay with me! Because, honestly this morning I really think we can find a thread running through all our Scripture readings; I think we can interpret each one as a call to us to make a vital and strong **response** to God. Let me share how I came to that.

I'll start with an overview of our scripture readings this morning. We begin with the Old Testament reading where Haggai (gotta' love that name: Haggai)... well Haggai challenges his people to begin work immediately and to **respond** to the gift of regaining their city of Jerusalem by enthusiastically rebuilding it and most especially, its holy temple.//////// And then, when we get to the Psalm, the writer of the Psalm promises that, for him, a relationship with God will be active and intentional praise...a focus on RESPONSE again. ///// And then, in the second Lesson: Paul's letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, he acknowledges that life has been difficult, indeed- confusing- in recent years, but he calls on them to stand firm and to rebuild their community.//////// And then we get to the Gospel where Jesus deals with a ridiculous story told as a trap for him, and then points to God as a God of the Living, to whom men and women are always called to respond.// So... all of our Scripture readings are really calling for a strong RESPONSE to God.

In our Church Calendar we are now just three Sundays away from the beginning of our Church YEAR all over again with the First Sunday of Advent and our time of preparation for the birth of Jesus: Christmas. With that in mind, there is a progression, a logic to our readings as we approach Advent.

Let's start with our first reading. Imagine: It is about a quarter of the way through the fifth century B.C. The city of Jerusalem is little more than a pile of rubble. Many who have come from exile in Babylon to rebuild the city have never seen it before and so have no memory of its former status. With them, from Babylon, has come the Prophet Haggai. We hear his voice encouraging the builders. His work is cut out for him. A drought is in progress. Money and other resources are in short supply, AND certainly enemies want to prevent their rebuilding. Little wonder that the word "courage" sounds frequently. "Take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua." They need courage! Haggai knows the challenge of the present efforts.

Among his listeners would have been some very elderly folk with memories of the former temple. He addresses them. "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?" And then Haggai offers the promise that all prophets make again and again. His message assures the People of God that they are not alone, even in this situation. He proclaims: "Work", says the Lord of hosts "for I am with you." "According to the promise I made

to you when you came out of Egypt. You are not alone. ///// My Spirit abides among you. Do not fear. "Would that **we** would always hear that in our hearts in our worst of times. "Do not fear. You are not alone. My Spirit abides with you."

Haggai displays that extraordinary quality that made the prophets so wonderfully inspiring. ... a vision of what was possible, through trusting in God. So NOW comes the trust in God. Haggai says, "I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord." And...centuries later, Haggai's prophecy did come true.

The very word "Jerusalem" literally means "place of peace", but we know it is a place that has not known peace!. I think that makes it hard to weave our first lesson into a message of hope. Like the ancient people of Israel, people of faith in this present age may see ourselves, to some degree, exiled from the heart of our culture and called to try to help build a stronger faith community that will help bring more goodness to our lives, and those we care about with whom we interact every day. Certainly, we want to be more responsive, more grateful for all that has been given to us. We need to hear Haggai as if he addresses us, "Now, take courage...work, for I am with you, says the Lord."

Now, let's us take a look at the Psalm. It seems to be a gentle meditation on God. We read, "I will Bless you and Praise your name forever and ever. One generation will praise your works to another." I think there are times we all have experienced this mysterious sense of time. ...this sense that one generation will praise your works to another. We can be at some place...perhaps along a shore...maybe a mountain slope...or maybe an occasion of worship, and suddenly we become aware of the many generations before us that have experienced this same scene, heard these waves, sung these hymns, seen these stars, said this particular prayer, and we have seen ourselves standing in this long succession. I sure know I feel it here in this church, and many others have expressed it as well...almost like the prayers of others are in the very wood of this sacred building. As the Psalm said: "One generation will praise your works to another."

So, here in this Psalm, God is great and powerful, but is shown in terms of ...gentleness. The Psalm says: "The Lord is righteous and loving in all his works...near to those who call upon him." Near to those who call upon him. How sweet is that!

And now, moving on to our Epistle/our Second Lesson: Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: Paul writes, "Brothers and sisters, beloved by the Lord." BELOVED!! Then he points out that "God chose you through sanctification by the Spirit. And then Paul adds that they were called through his own proclamation of the good news. He says they are LOVED by God. CHOSEN by God. Called by God. THAT'S US, right now, here, in our generation. That's US. Loved by God. Chosen by God. Called by God. So...there it is...the relevance of these readings for us right here today with all that each of us has to deal with. We are Loved, chosen and called by God. Paul sends a blessing to comfort their hearts, and ours, and to strengthen all of us, no matter what.

I know it is so easy to let our lives become just so "daily" ...just checking our lists and appointments and commitments, rather than being STILL and hearing God's quiet voice within, consoling, as needed, nudging, as needed, sending us in a different direction, as needed, if we will trust that

God IS with us, encouraging us to forgive, to not lose heart, and to move on in a more loving, a more truly loving way in all our relationships.

I suppose we must deal with the absurd story presented in the Gospel about the seven husbands and the question the Sadducees ask of whose wife is the woman in heaven? It is especially absurd coming from the Sadducees, since they are a group whose tradition within Judaism did not include resurrection of the dead. I can hear a Seminary professor of mine teaching us about the Sadducees...helping us to get the distinction between them and the Pharisees. He said that a huge difference between them and the Pharisees was that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection and then adding with a twinkle, the professor said: "That's why they are Sad you see!"

You can see this is set up as a trap for Jesus, not as any genuine concern. And isn't his response just so brilliant? He says: "God is a God of the Living". I take that to mean that we need to be ever mindful of our words and behavior as we live each blessed day, not to think there is some grand score card where we will be blessed in an afterlife, for good works we have done. But rather, to live with conviction, knowing that our Lord is as near as our breath, as near as our breath! That it is WE who fail to call on him, to lean on him, to invite him in to our situations. It is WE who create the separation, the feeling of "Where is God?" It is **we** who have been unaccepting of the bond our Lord wants for us, a bond that casts out fear, a bond that enables us to hear our Lord say to us, "Be not afraid! I go before you always." A love that never lets us go. It is WE who have to change our foolish ways and finally... be still... and know that our God created us in his image, loves us as his very own and will never give up on us.

I suggest that our Lord is saying all of this to them, but of course, to us. Jesus, The Christ, involves himself with our human lives. And he offers human life an eternal quality of life. This eternal quality of life does not begin beyond death. It begins now, in this life. It begins when we look at life through our Lord's eyes, when we try to reflect in OUR lives what we see in his. When we see how his birth, life, death and resurrection offer us a lens through which we come to see genuine meaning in our own human experience the difference each of us is called to make...if we can just get our concerns for SELF out of the way.

The message of Jesus is for US. God is a God of the Living/here with us now - - in all we do, in all we experience. In all the ways we respond to God' call to us, in all the ways we respond to others, and to situations in our lives. His promise is that WE are loved. We are not alone. God is with us always.

May we experience our very breath as the breath of God. Hear his love, feel His Spirit as he says to you, "Be not afraid. I am with you always!" And may we RESPOND in peace and Love.

AMEN