

7 November 2010 – “Who Knows What We Shall Be?” – Haggai 1.1-5; 2.1-9; 1 John 3.1-2

“Four score and seven years ago,” Lincoln bellows one crisp November afternoon in 1863, “our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation.” In the middle of a war testing the meddle of a nation still in its youth, this president, made old before his time, stands on the battlefield of Gettysburg and reflects upon a time that now seems more glorious and hopeful and settled than his present reality. Faced with a period of great uncertainty, Lincoln wonders whether the nation he loves, the nation he leads, will be able to survive, much less flourish ever again. Deep down in his gut, despite the stoic air he must put on as commander-in-chief, he is concerned at best and in despair at worst as he asks himself, “what in the world shall we be at the end of it all?”

It’s 520 BCE, Lincoln won’t be around for another 2400 years, and it’s a Jewish prophet named Haggai who is standing in the midst of uncertainty and turmoil and is speaking to a people who are wondering if their nation will be able to survive, much less flourish ever again. They’re all asking themselves “what in the world shall we be in a month, a year, a decade, a generation from now?”

Eighteen years before the prophet Haggai began his career as a public speaker, the Jews had returned home from exile in Babylon—that terrible time full of dark and dreadful memories of the end of everything they held dear. “Fifty-three score and 8 years ago,” the oldest Jews bellow, “our fathers brought forth on this continent, on this unlikely stretch of land, on this place of all the places they could have chosen, a new nation.” With a gleam of hope in their eyes and a tear of despair on their cheeks, they speak of a golden age—an age before their worship center was destroyed, a time before their homes were in shambles, an era before the majority of those with any vitality were born and raised outside the land of promise and held no memories of the tragedies of which their grandparents spoke as if they had happened an hour ago.

These descendants of Abram are back in the land of promise, the land that seems to have brought little promise and much trouble—more trouble than it was worth, most of them would tell you, after a drink or two limbered up their tongues. They have been back for nearly two decades by the time of Haggai’s ministry, and yet absolutely nothing is settled or certain or hopeful.

Hard work and persistence haven't been a problem, the prophet proclaims. Most people have re-built their homes by now, and quite a few have even had enough time to start cluttering them up until their once spacious space began to seem insufficient.

Many have been tilling their fields and planting crops. Everyone, in their own way, has been sowing seed anywhere and everywhere; and they all are waiting with baited breathe for some sign of life to spring up on the third day—or some such day, any day, every day, all day.

They've even started rebuilding the Temple, believing and hoping and praying and wishing that this would somehow bring better days. Yet almost as soon as they've begun, the oldest among them are grieved by the Temple's appearance because it pales in comparison to what stood before, while the youngest among them are grieved by their elders who are too old to help rebuild and yet, somehow, too young to know when to hold their tongues.

For all these efforts, for all of this so-called progress, for all this flourish of activity, they have nothing to show for their toil. Or at least next to nothing.

You have sown much, the prophet bellows, but harvested little. You drink, but never get your fill. You eat, but you never have enough. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. You earn wages and put them into a bag full of holes. And who among you is left who saw this sanctuary in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? (Haggai 1.6, 2.3)

Now it's 2010, Lincoln has been gone for nearly 150 years, this prophet of Israel for over 2500; and it is you and I who find ourselves in no less turmoil, no less uncertainty, no less trouble than these who have gone before us.

The economy, depending on whom you ask, is shaky at best and in shambles at worst. We, of all people, know what it looks like, what it feels like, to earn wages and place them into bags full of holes. We've learned what it's like to put money away for retirement, to invest hard-earned wages to prepare for a child's college education, to hire a fiscal guru to build up a financial portfolio, to work diligently for a company for years and then (despite all of the planning and strategizing and hard work and sage advice) find it gone overnight with little, if any, warning.

The society, depending on whom you ask, is shaky at best and in shambles at worst. We, of all people, know what it looks like, what it feels like, to search for contentment but find all our efforts wanting. We live in a nation as wealthy and prosperous as any that has ever dwelt upon this blessed earth; and yet we are a people who know that scarcity can exist

even in the midst of abundance. Thoreau called it a “quiet desperation.” The French have labeled it *ennui*—a spiritual, existential boredom, a weariness and discontentment with even the best that life has to offer, a state of existence that Sylvia Plath described as “designing futures where nothing will occur.”

We keep on drinking the best wine, the best coffee, the best water, but our thirst is never quenched. We keep on eating the most luxurious food, precisely seasoned and perfectly prepared, but the hunger remains. We keep on acquiring the most stylish and comfortable clothing, but never find warmth. In desperation we even rededicate ourselves to re-building or re-creating those places where we once encountered God, trying to restore them to the grandeur of days gone by, trying to conjure up an experience from years past when God seemed most present, most real, most alive, yet find them mere shadows of what was before.

In countless ways we keep trying to get back to an idealized time because we are far enough removed from it that we’ve forgotten it was, in many ways, no more glorious than our present. We lead lives of “quiet desperation,” “designing futures where nothing will occur,” because we don’t know (or, at the very least, have forgotten) who we are and what we shall be. We’ve lost what’s most important in our pursuit of fullness of life. We’ve somehow misplaced ourselves.

Sometime around the year 110 CE, a community of faith has formed around the memories of Jesus held in the mind of one known as “the beloved disciple”—whom tradition calls John but who may have gone by the name Max or Margaret for all we know.

These believers are facing this haunting question asked by Lincoln, by Haggai, by the whole blessed and broken bunch of us: “What shall become of us? What shall we be tomorrow, a week from now, a year from now, ten thousand years from now? What are we becoming? What shall we be when we grow up?” And in a moment of disarming honesty, the disciple bellows, “What we shall be has not yet been made known” (1 Jn 3.2)

On the small island of Giudducio, separated from Venice by a small canal, lives an electrician known to the locals as “Capitano Mario.” At work, Mario seems normal enough, but he has an unusual hobby—he’ll dress up like a member of the Italian army one afternoon, then the Italian navy the next; like a firefighter one morning, then a police officer the next. And so on it goes. If you ask those who know him, they would tell you that when he’s at work you wouldn’t think he was unusual at all. When he’s not working? Well, “Mario’s in his own world...his head is in the clouds. He’s in a dream state. Just as we all

are at times. And like some people, [like all people, if we're honest], Mario sometimes forgets he's only dreaming."¹

"It is for us the living," Lincoln bellows as he dresses himself and his nation up to dream of a brighter, more hopeful future, "to be dedicated here to the unfinished work...to the great task remaining before us...[so] that this nation...shall have a new birth of freedom."

"In a little while God will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land," Haggai bellows as he puts on his uniform and tries to forget that he (and perhaps even God) is only dreaming, "and the glory of this present sanctuary [this present world, this present humanity] will be greater than the glory of the former, and in this place God will grant *shalom*" (Haggai 2.6-9).

"Dear friends, we are children of God," the beloved disciple bellows, as he tries to shape his community into the image of Christ, of God, of humanity, "and what we shall be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Messiah comes, we shall be like him, we shall be human like him, we shall be the image of God like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I Jn 3.1-2)

What compels a fifty-year-old Venetian electrician, a fifty-four-year-old president, a who-knows-how-old prophet to play dress up, to play make believe? God only knows; but God bless them for doing it. God bless them all for reminding us that it's still OK to dream of what we want to be when we grow up, because whether we are 1 or 100 we are, all of us, on a journey of becoming, the end of which we aren't yet certain.

"We still only see in a mirror dimly" (I Cor 13.12), one apostle tells us, which is perhaps the truest thing he ever said of all his many words. "None of us knows what we shall be," a beloved disciple chimes in, "because what we shall be has not yet been made known" (I Jn 3.2). "But it doesn't hurt to dress up and, if we're lucky, forget that we're only dreaming once in a while," says an Venetian day-dreamer. "It's appropriate, it's even necessary to imagine and to hope for a better tomorrow, a future where a grand and glorious hope is found in God's redeeming peace," adds a president and a prophet.

Who knows what we shall be? Who can say what shall become of us all? Is there anyone who knows the answer?

¹ Peter Berendt, *The City of Falling Angels*, 71-72.

Even though we don't know what we shall be when we grow up, we do know that every last one of us is a beloved child of God, who, by some great and mysterious grace, is being fashioned into the image of God—long obscured and neglected but never fully lost or forgotten. And when we, at long last, grow up into the fullness of God, of Jesus, of our own humanity, we shall see God, see Jesus, see ourselves, see all of creation as they should be, as they could be, as they will someday be seen.

“And it will be more glorious than anything we've ever known or seen or imagined,” they all bellow in unison, because the God who often seems absent and the peace that always seems absent will at long last be found. Thanks be to God! Amen.