

“How Do You See It *Now*?”
Haggai 2:1-9
February 9, 2020

Back when I was teaching in the modern languages department at Trinity, I used to invite a group of friends every Labor Day weekend for a less-than-traditional cookout. Now when my friend Misha arrived, Misha suggested that we take a little walk to collect some mushrooms for the salad that was to accompany the roast leg of lamb destined for the grill. “That will take some time,” I thought. “No mushrooms around here!” But I was wrong. Misha picked up a basket and off we went. As we walked, Misha was constantly bending down, picking, bending down, picking. As you might have guessed from his name, Misha was Russian, and like many Russians, he knew all about mushrooms in the wild.

I was astonished. Within 10 minutes the basket was full, even though look as I might, I saw nothing but grass. No mushrooms. I could only see what I was prepared to see. There were mushrooms all around, but I couldn’t see them because I didn’t know what to look for.

So many of us see only what we are prepared to see. Of course, some people see only the negative. One woman tells how, after years of persuasion, her mother was finally talked into having a cataract operation. Returning home from the hospital, the mother sat down in front of the picture window, which looked out over a lake. “Do you notice any difference in the view, Mom?” the daughter asked, hopefully. “I certainly do,” her mother replied icily. “Don’t you ever dust??!”

Some of us see only what we are prepared to see. That insight, by the way, comes from the studies of modern psychology, and is borne out in reality. To that truth I would like to add the observation of a lay philosopher and sometime theologian, the comedian Flip Wilson. His famous phrase, you might remember, was “What you see is what you get.” And that statement, if you think about it, is a little more profound, and a little less Flip, than we might first realize.

What you see IS what you get. “That which I feared has come to pass” says Job on the ash-heap. Often, that is no accident. Motivational speakers have stated that those who see themselves as winners, even in difficult times, usually are. Those who expect the future to be better than the past, are generally right. The American Dream we hear so much about is only

possible if we see the future as being, somehow, an improvement on what we already have. Our health, our ability to relate to others, our future success depend to a great extent on what we see.

If we see more good than bad, good is more likely to be in store for us. So let's look and see what that has to do with the prophet Haggai this morning.

Haggai's mission was to encourage the Jews to rebuild their Temple which had been destroyed when the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem. The holy city lay in complete ruins for some 70 years. So Haggai confronted the governor (who was the son of the high priest) along with the remnant of Israel that was left after defeat and exile, and pointedly asked: "Who is left among you that saw this House in its former glory?" Then he followed this question with another one: "How do you see it Now?"

The nation of Israel had been scattered. The holy Temple had been reduced to rubble. The past had not been kind to God's people. The question Haggai posed, however, was not about the past, but about present possibilities. How do you see it, Now? Haggai asked.

That is the same question that we should be asking about our lives, about our nation, about our world, and about our church. How do we see ourselves? Counselors note that individuals often make statements like, "I'm just hard to get along with," or "I've always been lazy, so I just can't get things done." The underlying message is that this is the way things are, and there is no way for them to change. And as long as we believe we cannot change, the odds are against us.

Once we make up our minds that there is some hope, however, new possibilities can come into view. It is important for us to ask ourselves, What do we see? Do we see ourselves as victims, or as someone with potential, with something to contribute? How do we see ourselves? Are we merely slaves to our appetites? Or do we take to heart the adage that in any pursuits we may engage in, Moderation in All Things is a good rule of thumb. Chances are, though, that when we view ourselves, what we see is only what we are prepared to see. We need to be realistic, and yet kind, to ourselves.

How do we see the world? Down in Virginia, not too far from where my parents used to live, there's a fine old house owned by a distinguished colonial family. Over the fireplace hangs a rifle, loaded and primed to fire - as it has been, ever since the American Revolution. The rifle,

though, was never used. Why!? Seems to tell that the owner back in 1776 had known George Washington as a boy, and never had any confidence in him, or in his family. He certainly was not going to place himself in an army under Washington's command! So the owner of the rifle waited for the battle to come to him. It never did.

How do we see the world? Do we have our muskets loaded, primed, and ready to fire - but unused - because we lack faith in others? How do we view our neighbors? Again, a dose of realism is called for, but let's be kind in our assessments of one another if we possibly can. If we view others positively, perhaps our openness, our graciousness, our neighborliness will elicit in others a similar reaction. And a world in which we are all prepared to see the divine image in one another cannot help but be a better world than the one in which we currently live, where all too often the rule is not community, but suspicion, negativity, and divisiveness.

How do we see our congregation? Are we hopeful about our future? I certainly am, not only because things look good "on paper," but also because in a spirit of hopefulness we are picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off, not being content to complain about previous failings or shortcomings, and about who used to attend once upon a time, but no longer does. Instead, we can see - as did Haggai - that no matter how unhappy things were for a while there, we can create a future, not necessarily by recreating the past, but by building on what God has resourced us with in the here and now.

So many of my pastoral colleagues complain that the outlook for religion - especially since the Great Recession of something over a decade ago - doesn't look bright to them. Just this last Thanksgiving when I joined a group of colleagues for an ecumenical service, all I heard about was how American society is more and more secular, how the culture doesn't allow for faithfulness or religiosity, how Generations X or Y or Z have their minds elsewhere and therefore their bodies are not in the pews. How churches are closing, how denominations are disheartened. And when I told them that the world they were describing did not apply to Colebrook, they didn't believe me.

Now I'm not a Pollyanna type who sees only sunshine, rainbows, and roses. We do need to learn from our past, and we do need to correct our mistakes - so that we can affirm what is

good, and then be willing to follow wherever God leads, knowing that if God is in control of our congregation, then our future cannot help but be assured.

For that is the message of Haggai. In fact, that is what theologians call a Theology of Hope. That is what is properly called “Christianity.”

Just a final humorous thought for this morning: a church choir was raising money to attend a music competition and decided to have a car wash. To everyone’s dismay, after a busy morning the rain began pouring down in midafternoon, and the customers stopped coming. Finally one of the sopranos came up with a hand-made poster - written with a waterproof marker, no doubt - which said “We Wash” ... and with a huge arrow pointing skyward, she added the caption underneath: “He Rinses.” Business was soon booming again.

Sometimes it may seem like it’s always raining, or at least the skies seem to be a bit overcast. But beyond that, what are we prepared to see? How do we see it - not as in former days, but how do we see it, Now?

Let us pray: