

*“In This Place”*

*Haggai 2:1-19*

*September 29, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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*“The silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. 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 2:8-9

Today’s message, “In This Place,” is designed to help us think about and appreciate a “theology of place.” A “theology of place” begins with two biblical assertions. First, God is the creator, subordinate to nothing and everywhere around us. Because God is everywhere, the sacred is everywhere. When people say “I don’t need to go to a church building to worship God” they are quite correct. Whether they misuse this truth to simply justify missing worship is a separate matter.

Second, you and I are created in God’s likeness and to exercise dominion over creation. Therein lies our glory and our tragedy. At our best we aspire to the sacred spirit that pervades all of creation. At our worst, we forget God and make ourselves God, the center of all.

Our churches and this church reflect that tension. At our best our church building reminds us of the sacred spirit of God that abounds in the world and universe, that needs no building nor human monument to grant authority and power. This sanctuary augments our limited minds that sometimes forget that God is around and within us; and not only us, but those neighbors around us. It stands as a sentinel beckoning others to God, like the woman who walked into my office this past Thursday. She has walked past us many times, she said, but on Thursday God said “Go in.” She did, and we had a wonderful conversation from which she intends to return to Sunday worship. In short, our church helps us remember what we sang in our opening hymn, “God is Here.”

At our worst, our church becomes an idol, a monument to human achievement that is worshipped for its own sake, rather than seen and

used as a tool to help us live as disciples in the name of the One who died that we might live forevermore. Such idol worship places property above people and gives us spiritual amnesia about the call of God. I am pleased to say that our leaders whose responsibility is the stewardship of this property understand this relationship of property to discipleship.

The Gospel story soberly reminds of the call to discipleship. The text is unmistakably clear: when we ignore our neighbor's need there is hell to pay. You like a softer, gentler god? Me, too. Because I am rich, as are most of us. Ask those who came to Dodd Hall last Thursday, as they do each fourth Thursday, to our Community Supper; and who are often not sure where their next meal is coming from. They are fed because our people spend their time and money to do so. In fact, you do so: a portion of the budget you support underwrites this ministry. This church—both the community of people we call the church, and the edifice from which ministry happens—reveals God “in this place.”

But look: there are other hungers, are there not? Every Communion service we take the cup Christ gave us and it fills us so that our cup can be filled for others. At the Bishop's Retreat last Monday our District Superintendent, Rev. Kieffer, gave us a piece of paper that I have given today to you. It has four columns for you to list five things that fill your cup; when you last did them; five things that drain your cup; and whether and how you need to get rid of them. I am going to pause for several minutes to give those who wish time to fill it out. [            ]. I encourage you to find ways to do those things that fill your cup; and ways to divest yourselves of those things that do not.

And do it in community. For a “theology of place” must be a theology of community. Today's prophecy from Haggai comes after the destruction of the first temple in 587 B.C.: Solomon's temple destroyed by the invading Babylonians and the cream of Jewish leadership exiled there. For over three generations the community was shredded. But by the time of Haggai the Hebrew people had returned to Israel under the benevolent leadership of Cyrus the Persian, whose army routed the Babylonians. Jewish leadership reestablished itself but the temple and

the religious community did not. Haggai's prophecy reminds the people that the restoration of the temple is part of what it is to live in community and that their "prosperity" is given from God. The temple is not an exercise in human pride; it is the place where the gathered community remembers God, receives God and renews itself in the service of God.

We are not always sure, and yet we are. Consider the paratrooper recruits shouted at by their drill sergeant. As they stood in formation he went to each one and shouted: "Do you love to jump, soldier?" "Yes, sergeant," came the reply. Down the line he went, each answer the same until: "Do you love to jump, soldier?" "No, sergeant!" "What?!?" "No, sergeant." "Well, then, can you tell me why you are here?" "Because, sergeant, I love to be with other soldiers who love to jump, sergeant!" We may not always love to jump the leap of faith but we often love to be with others who love to jump. And it's contagious!

I share with permission this testimony I received last Thursday from one of our members. In this instance, the tool of what happened "in this place" was our church newsletter, "The Beacon," but the incubator was and is the church and community of Mary Taylor Memorial Church. They wrote:

*"For years I have thought that I should look for programs that needed volunteers to help tutor women. It was an uncomfortable voice speaking in my head and I always managed to find 'legitimate' excuses to silence that voice.*

*Recently, I found out that a full time job I had applied for was not going to give me an interview. I really wanted this job; I thought my skill set was perfect – the company, however, decided to interview candidates who were better matches to the job description: meaning they already performed that job at other companies. I was crushed but also thankful because with the kids' schedules I really wondered how I would manage going from part-time to full-time.*

*I realized that I was very lucky. Even though I don't like what I am doing, it is a good job with benefits that pays well. My supervisor is*

*very understanding and gives me a lot of flexibility with my schedule. I realized that even though I felt like I wanted more of a challenge, now was not the time.*

*The next morning I saw the “Beacon” article saying Mercy Learning Center [in Bridgeport] needed volunteer tutors, 2 hours twice a week. It was one of those moments when you realize God is done whispering to you, he is shouting in your face! So, I had a little conversation in my head with God: ‘Okay, okay, I get it. I will e-mail right now.’ And I did. I had the training yesterday and I felt so out of my comfort zone, I was very nervous. Then tonight I get a letter that I have been paired up with a young woman having trouble passing her GED (graduate equivalency diploma) in Science and Math—my comfort zone!!!! I still am nervous, just because it is new, but very excited. I will let you know as time goes on how it goes! Looking forward to seeing you on Sunday.”*

Do the things that fill your cup. Experience the living God in this place. Receive God’s promise: in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.