

**Haggai 1:15b-2:9****Twenty-fourth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, November 14, 2004****Ingathering Sunday III**

There is encouragement when someone is close at hand. Last year when Jim Blevins, Phil and Sue McGukin and I were in Mozambique with Katie Jackson, each of us was graced with a particular task. Jim and Phil spent two weeks building a church building. Sue and Katie did their thing, teaching True Love Waits.

My host, Missionary Journeyman, Mike McCoy, whose term is now complete and who is home in Portland, Oregon, and I went into the bush where I taught pastors and other church leaders and did hut-to-hut evangelism. It was a wonderful experience to fellowship with those brothers and sisters in the southern hemisphere. I felt so inadequate, though, in teaching those good brothers. Once as I was teaching and fielding questions, Mike, who was sitting beside me and interpreting for me, sense my inadequacy. He leaned over and said, "You're doing fine. These guys really are getting this." I took courage. My new friend, Mike, was close, so I could take courage even in the midst of my feelings of inadequacy.

The next week, Katie and Sue journeyed with Mike and me into another area. Again, part of my task was to teach local pastors and church leaders. As I would field questions, Katie interpreted for me. She sat beside me in the small church building that was no bigger, perhaps even smaller, than our Parlor. Mike and Sue sat behind me. We always attempted to undergird everything with scripture – not proof-texting, but with scripture in its context. As questions came and I answered, Sue and Mike were hard at work looking up scriptures that I could share. Sometimes Sue would hand me her Bible. At other times she would whisper in my ear. I'm glad Katie and Mike were there. I'm glad Sue was there. Their close presence enabled me to take courage.

Each of us can take courage because God really is close. Isn't that what we need today? The church is in need of courageous people. People who are willing to be Firstfruits Living and Giving people. People who are willing be disciplined about giving monetarily to the church. People who are willing to be present on this campus every Lord's Day morning to study and learn, to share and fellowship, and most of all, to worship the Risen Lord of Lord and King of Kings. In this day and time, in these distressing times, it takes a great deal of courage to be disciplined. We can take courage in these times because God is close. Just as Mike McCoy, Katie Jackson, and Sue McGukin were close, so is God.

Most of us need reminding of that. Sometimes that reminding comes poignancy. While I'm not into violence, I have to say that the movie, "Brave Heart" is one of the finest I've seen. It is a violent movie and regardless what one's take may be on Mel Gibson, that movie is historically accurate, I'm told. I watched part of it Friday evening. As William Wallace confessed to God in the confines of his prison cell, he acknowledged his fear and asked God to help him be courageous. In the torture prior to his death, one can sense resoluteness about him and surely it was nothing short of the closeness of God. Courageously he faced his executioners with the knowledge that God was close. As a result of his death, the clans of Scotland in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, took courage and won their freedom from England. His death was a reminder that God was close.

Long, long before I journeyed to Mozambique and long, long before the heroic likes of William Wallace and the Brave Hearts, God was at work to encourage His people to take courage. Through the likes of a prophet named Haggai, the Lord God spoke words that challenged and delighted a group of people whose lives had been shattered as they returned to a land called "Promised," where a city, a holy city, lay in ruins and a Temple seemed to be still smoldering in the ashes even though it had been burned some 70 years earlier.

It's not 2003 in Mozambique. It's not 1314 in Scotland. It's October 520 BC in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel is the governor and Joshua is the high priest. These are the leaders of God's people. They are

trying to celebrate one of the feasts that was prescribed in the Law: the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of Booths and the Feast of Ingathering. It is hard for them to celebrate. They've come home to the misery of others and their own misery. They can only remember the splendor and joy of another time. They are despondent. They are agitated. They are overwhelmed with remorse. They feel as if they are all alone. They are dead in their tracks. Unable to move forward they stagger in the mire of their own distress and are unable to rebuild the Temple. So God brings them a word of encouragement through a prophet named Haggai.

The message is essentially simple and yet profound to the core. In the midst of their misery, despondency, agitation, remorse, and aloneness, the prophet says on behalf of their God, ***“take courage, O Zerubbabel... take courage, O Joshua... take courage, all you people of the land... for I am with you... My spirit abides among you; do not fear”*** (v. 4 & v. 5b). As a result of Haggai's word and the word of his contemporary, Zechariah, the people of God did take courage and rebuild the Temple.

Is this not a word for us? I think so. This is not 2003 in Mozambique. This is not 1314 in Scotland. This is not 520 BC in Jerusalem. This is 2004 in Tabernacle Baptist Church. Do we not need to hear the words of this text speaking to us on this day of ingathering? I hear God saying, “Take courage, Pastor Jimmy and Pastoral Team. Take courage Deacon Body. Take courage committee members. Take courage Bible study leaders. Take courage worship leaders. Take courage all you people of Tabernacle. My Holy Spirit abides among all of you. Do not fear.”

God really is close, Tabernacle. Too often we forget that He is. He is close in this hour. He is close even when we aren't here. And His closeness allows for us to take courage and do when just maybe we don't want to do. Our ancestors in 520 BC didn't want to do much of anything. Do you ever get that way?

I'm a member of a group called Metro Ministers' Conference. This group of 35, or so, pastors serve churches similar in size and are located in metropolitan areas across the Southeast and Southwest. We meet in January each year. Last year as I was sharing with the group what was going on in my life, I remarked that there are times when I just want to sit in my favorite chair at home and do absolutely nothing. I said I felt guilty about that. My friend at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, George Mason, remarked, “Don't feel guilty!” A couple of weeks ago, I met my dear friend, Bob Browning, who pastors Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, for coffee in Marietta. We've been friends for thirty years, having pastored together in Kentucky. Our wives both bear the name “Jackie” and we get together occasionally for a meal. Bob remarked to me while having coffee, “Remember when you said you just want to sit in a chair and do nothing? I'm enjoying sitting in the chair and doing absolutely nothing, except looking out the window while I sit in the chair!”

Do you ever get that way? Do you just want to sit and do nothing? Don't feel guilty. That's OK for a while. But don't sit around and do nothing for every long. Otherwise your life will be characterized by nothingness. We are more than nothing.

And because we are, this is why the splendor of ministry should be greater today than it was yesterday. Don't believe it? Listen again to Haggai. “Take courage... I am with you... My Spirit abides among you. Do not be afraid... ***“I will fill this house with splendor... The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former...”*** (vv. 8-9). All that has been accomplished in the past is splendid. But all that will be accomplished in the future is of even greater splendor.

Today we can take courage in that declaration. The Lord really is with us. His Spirit abides. We can live without fear in this world where I suppose we should be scared to death. His closeness will move us off our laziness. His closeness will move us to be here in Bible Study and Worship. His closeness will move us to give our tithes and offerings and even far beyond what we think we can give, not only on a special day like Ingathering Sunday, but week after week. His closeness will move us to present our lives as living temples that He fills with His Spirit. His closeness will enable us to live, with humility, the Christ-like life that will result in the betterment of our souls and in blessing, which this world needs. Now when the world is blessed, the world will look at us and say, “Their lives are filled with splendor!”

Their God really is close. Surely He is there in their lives. We want that, too, for their God's presence seems to be enough."

William Sloan Coffin is a former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, where he served from 1977-1987. An outstanding preacher with a pastor's heart and conviction, he knows the agony of loss. Coffin lost a son in death some years ago. He recently observed that over the years, people have said to him, "Well, when you die, Bill, Alex will come forth and bring you through the Pearly Gates." Coffin said that's a soothing thought and he would welcome such an event. What a way to enter heaven he thought. He continued, "But I don't need to believe that. All I need to know is that God will be there. Our lives come from God, they live in God, and when we die, they return to God if we are believers in Jesus Christ. It should be enough to know that God is there."<sup>1</sup> I would add to that: "It should be enough to know that God is here. Right now."

So let us take courage, because God really is close. Let us come, all of us who are Christians, and be committed to the service of our Lord. Let us be present often on this hallowed ground in this sacred space. Let us give joyfully and sacrificially always. Let us believe God really is close right now. And let us believe that God will be there when this life ceases and the next begins. Don't be afraid of the future. Don't be afraid of the present. Take courage. God really is close. Talk about splendor! Through Jesus Christ He's in my life and yours if you believe. Wow! God really is close and that's enough to get the job done.

That's what I think. What about you?

### **Pastoral Blessing**

Depart, now, in the knowledge that God, your Heavenly Father, is with you.

And as you go, remember:

In the goodness of God, you are being exhorted to take courage every day;

By the grace of God, you are being given eternal comfort and good hope; and

In the love of God, you are being strengthened in every good work and word for Jesus

Christ, Risen from the dead and He is Lord!

Take courage as you go for God really is close!

Praise be to the Lord God Most High forever and ever! Amen and Amen.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor**

**Tabernacle Baptist Church**

**Carrollton, Georgia**

**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.**

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview of William Sloan Coffin, conducted March 5, 2004 on *NOW with Bill Moyers*, PBS.