

SERMON SICC - JUNE 27th, 2010

Haggai 2:1-9 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 2 "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 3 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? 4 But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 5 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' 6 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 8 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 9 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Hebrews 12:22-29 You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 25 See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken-- that is, created things-- so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, 29 for our "God is a consuming fire."

The massive tree had suffered severe structural damage by the continuous onslaught of the helicopter gunships and finally collapsed to the great dismay of the Na'vi.

Through its great size - about 2-3 times the size of the ancient Californian Redwoods - the ancient Hometree had provided shelter for many generations of the clan who lived in its branches. They fled on foot to the Tree of Souls which was now their last refuge. If the Tree of Souls - which provided a direct link to Eywa, but also had the capability to connect directly to the nervous system of all living things - also fell, that would prove fatal to the survival of the entire race of the Na'vi.

Because this scene is straight from one of the most successful Hollywood films of our times - Avatar - and thus by definition must have a happy ending, the Tree of Souls of course did not fall and the Na'vi did survive.

Another people which would empathize with the plight of the Na'vi, because they had similar experiences, were the people of Israel. Their Hometree, which had sheltered them for many generations, the Holy City of Jerusalem, had fallen to the onslaught of the Babylonian war machine, and the whole population were dragged into exile. But they had fared worse than the Na'vi: even their 'Tree of Souls', the temple with the holiest utensils of worship, the ark of the covenant, were plundered. Israel would not have survived the 70-year long exile as a nation, if they had not been able to take a sapling of that tree of souls, so to speak, with them: their faith and the word of their prophets, who continued to encourage them that there was light at the end of the tunnel, that their plight would eventually come to an end.

Now, at the time of the prophet Haggai's writing, this miracle had happened. God had used benevolent Persian kings, Cyrus and then Darius, to open the way for Israel to return to their homeland. They were even allowed to rebuild their temple. But it was only a half-miracle. Only very few Israelites had returned, mostly the ones who had little to lose in Babylon, and they were beset with difficulties and opposition on all sides. Also the temple project continued to be delayed, due to lack of finances and of interest on the part of the citizens who did have money but would rather spend it on their own stately homes instead.

The intermediate structure which served as temple was a far cry from the former glory of Solomon's temple and an object of ridicule for Israel's opponents.

Haggai and other prophets, particularly Zechariah, had to constantly admonish the people to not give up the project, and to encourage them that God was not finished with them yet. Haggai and also Zechariah painted the picture of a temple that would be filled with God's glory and would be even more awe-inspiring than the one Solomon had built. It would become the centre of a worldwide pilgrimage, a place of worship to which whole nations from all over the world would come. They would seek the Lord and entreat him to bless them as he had blessed Israel.

In their self-protective reflex, Israel had often forgotten that their blessings were not for them to keep. They were supposed to be a blessing to the nations and enable the Gentiles to get to know God and His commandments. This would happen by the following

means: 1. God would instigate a mighty shaking among the nations that would propel them to seek God and get on the way for the pilgrimage; and 2. God would reveal his glory in Jerusalem, for the whole world to see.

But lest we think, that this would be God's unilateral action with no contribution by humans, Haggai says: „be strong and work!“ The temple has to be built by human hands and then it will be filled with God's glory. The bones are human - the meat is divine!

The church of the NT, as the new Jerusalem, no longer needs a physical temple, as each one of us is the temple of the Holy Spirit if we have surrendered our lives to Jesus Christ.

We too, like Israel, are supposed to share our blessings with the nations, with those who do not know God. God wants us too communally to be a holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, to which the world comes in pilgrimage, as they can see that God is with us. I am convinced that evangelism and missions in our materialistic age will only be marginally successful unless those same 2 things happen: 1. the world is shaken; and 2. God's glory is made manifest in and through the church.

Let me look at these 2 points in more detail, but I want to start with the second one first.

Observing the almost endless revelations of sexual abuse and denial in the church these days, one wonders if the world will ever see the glory of God in the church. Although these instances of abuse were mostly perpetrated by priests of the RC church, we have no reason for gloating. As Ulrich Körtner, professor at the Evangelische Universität in Vienna stated in a TV talkshow, scandals constitute a problem for all the churches. People in the world generally do not distinguish between one church and another. For many all of Christianity has lost credibility and as one victim said on TV, he is done with the Christian religion, period.

So the question is: what can we as Christians do to get that temple up and shine?

Haggai simply says, „Be strong and work!“ That's not meant as Schwarzenegger-style actionism & workaholism, but rather to be strong or confident in your faith and don't just passively sit there to wait for God to intervene!

Zechariah is more specific, in ch. 8 he says: „Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts“; „love truth and peace“. Truth and peace are the 2 hallmarks that characterize God's covenant relationship with us. To be truthful in all our dealings with one another and to seek peace, based on justice and righteousness,

are of the utmost importance, if we want to reflect God's character. But peace - shalom in Hebrew - is more than just the absence of war or violence. It is more like well-being. All around well-being for the whole creation, where every creature is treated with respect and gentleness.

The church, I think, is called to practice, to learn, to grow more and more into habits of living truth and peace. To live truth, I think, is not primarily telling another a lot of truthful things - especially when we try to correct them - but in the way God is truthful, i.e. reliable and trustworthy in all he says or does. It means to be utterly dependable. To be there for one another through thick or thin, in good or bad times. God's glory is in the love culture of his people and is immensely attractive to the world and will be even more so in the future, as I will show in a moment.

On the remote planet of Pandora, a military station has been installed to secure the exploitation of the precious mineral unobtainium. Unfortunately for the miners, the planet is populated by a race of 3m high, blue-skinned humanoids (and a few fearsome animal predators as well) who take exception to the exploitation of the mineral, particularly in their sacred areas. Corporal Jake Sully is a disabled former Marine who becomes part of the Avatar Program and is being used to infiltrate the Na'vi (as the blueskins call themselves) via Na'vi-human hybrid bodies called avatars that are operated via mental link to genetically matching humans. But unforeseen events make him fall behind the other members of his team and get lost. He ends up among the Na'vi like Kevin Costner among the Indians. He falls in love with a female Na'vi (of course, it's a Hollywood movie), but also becomes totally enthralled by the wondrous world of the Na'vi who live in complete harmony with their environment. He in the end decides to leave his human world for good to join his fate with that of the Na'vi. Jake's experiences with the Shalom of the Na'vi culture is all that is needed to convince him he wants to live like them and turn his back on the selfish and destructive ways of his own culture.

The second way, however, how God is going to attract the unbelieving world to the church is through the shaking that is going to happen.

This present financial crisis is not the last or even the worst we are going to see. Writer James Howard Kunstler in his book, *The Long Emergency*, sees the world inexorably steering towards a series of converging catastrophes in the near future. As it looks now, climate change might easily go beyond a tipping point and spin completely out of control, with unimaginable consequences. But there is more. As Kunstler writes (p2):

„Above all, and most immediately, we face the end of the cheap fossil fuel era. It is no exaggeration to state that reliable supplies of cheap oil and natural gas underlie everything we identify as modern life. All the necessities, comforts, luxuries, and miracles of our time - central heating, air conditioning, cars, airplanes, electric lighting, cheap clothing, recorded music, movies, supermarkets, power tools, hip replacement surgery, national defense, you name it - owe their origins or continued existence to cheap fossil fuel.“

And further:

„What is generally not comprehended about this predicament is that the developed world will begin to suffer long before the oil and gas actually run out. The American way of life [and I would add: the Canadian, European, Australian, etc. way of life as well] can run only on reliable supplies of dependably cheap oil and gas. Even mild to moderate deviations in either price or supply will crush our economy...“

To these two crises I want to add more: depleting fish stocks, desertification and exhaustion of arable land, massive die-off of species, overpopulation. The debt crisis is putting immense pressure on national economies and force governments to massively cut spending, as seen already in Greece and the UK. The middle classes, whose spending habits are the main motors of economy, will largely disappear in W. society. We can imagine in the mass protests in France and Greece in the last weeks which are caused by relatively mild changes what could happen if living standards sink more drastically in the future, as they very likely will. The end of democracy and of the comfortable world as we know it!

Frank Fenner, a fellow of the Australian Academy of Science and of the Royal Society, has received many awards and honours. He has published hundreds of scientific papers and written or co-written 22 books. Fenner is also an authority on extinction. The emeritus professor in microbiology at the Australian National University played a leading role in sending one species into oblivion: the variola virus that causes smallpox.

Frank Fenner is 95 years old and rarely gives interviews. But he gave one recently for an Australian newspaper in which he said, "We're going to become extinct. Whatever we do now is too late." Fenner says the real trouble is the population explosion and "unbridled consumption".

Fenner's scientist colleagues say to this, "Frank may be right, but some of us still harbour the hope that there will come about an awareness of the situation and, as a result, the revolutionary changes necessary [to turn the tide].

I personally don't share this optimism for human ability and/or willingness to change so drastically. If we were left to our own devices, we would surely go extinct soon. But if we were left to our own devices, we would not be here at all! For belief in human ability I would substitute hope and belief in divine intervention. I believe that God will not allow humankind to go extinct, but he will very likely allow the shaking to happen, so that, as Hebrews states, „what cannot be shaken may remain.“

Professor Fenner named the two sources of our trouble: population explosion and unbridled consumption. We in the West cannot much help the population explosion. At least we are not called to not have babies anymore. But we can help the unbridled consumption. But that will stop soon anyway. When the debt crisis really hits, when cheap oil runs out, when large segments of the population in our societies hit rock bottom, that unbridled consumption will end. „The party is over!“, or „Schluss mit lustig - das Ende der Spassgesellschaft“, as the titles of 2 books proclaim.

„The age of exuberance is ending“, William Catton, former professor of sociology at Washington State University, wrote in a groundbreaking book in 1980. He wrote that humans have been overshooting their ecological basis since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the mid-1800s. It could very well be that most everything that has happened since 1850 could prove to be a pleasant but unsustainable adventure and that reality is going to catch up with us, reality of a post-industrial kind.

As a result of disappointed expectations - as governments fail to provide their nations with the means to continue to pursue this unbridled consumption - we will see massive social and political unrest. People will start looking desperately for factors of stability in an increasingly unstable world. That's where Christian community will come in. More than one book that I read on the subject of climate change etc. mention the prominent future role of local community. Individualists will not survive the coming catastrophes. Of course, these books do not mean *Christian* community. But Christians may be on the forefront of building small sustainable communities as they may have learned what it means to live selflessly, humbly, with loving concern for one another and respectfully using our finite resources. In addition they have an all-powerful and all-wise God on their side. The prophets predict some pretty awesome demonstrations of God's power in those days, much in contrast to the impotence and despair of human leadership. That's where God may lead the world's nations in mass pilgrimages to the 'heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God.'

After Colonel Quaritch and his troops, in their greed for the precious mineral

unobtanium, have caused much havoc to the lush forests of Pandora, the mother of all battles for the dominion of the planet enfolds. But the enemy can be defeated in the end and the destruction stopped, due to community effort and selfless individual heroism. Life does win over death.

Our hope as Christians goes beyond the preservation of a paradise on earth. Scripture does not allow for that illusion: *"Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."* Or as 2 Peter 3:10 says, *„The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.“*

What can and will be destroyed is not what ultimately defines us. Our hope as Christians is grounded in this promise from God: *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.“*

Amen