

“The First Hundred Years”

Haggai 1:1-11

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

November 7, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

This is the hundredth anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone of this great building. A service was held to commemorate the event on November 6, 1921. It would be another year before the first service was held here in October of 1922. It's said that on that fateful fall day, the people walked over from the old building on the corner of 4th and 13th singing “Onward Christian Soldiers”. It made sense back then. It was a relatively new song written by Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. The people had just endured a pandemic and a world war. They were now on the optimistic cusp of the roaring 20's. It was a heady time. Why not build a new church to commemorate it all?

The program from November 6, 1921 includes an address by Dr. Allan Hoben entitled “Hints from Haggai”. It was decades before “Hints from Heloise” made its syndicated debut. We don't have the text of that address, but we can imagine it.

The Prophet Haggai preached after the exile. It may not really be his name. His name is similar to Hgg which means pilgrimage. Think of the Muslim use of this term, calling people to the ancient temple of Abraham in Mecca. Haggai scolds the people for concentrating on other things rather than rebuilding the forsaken temple. When they returned from the exile, they found the old temple just a jumble of charred stones. While there was a quick attempts to rebuild the temple, other priorities choked out the temple construction project, like farming and finding homes, and negotiating with the people who had called this spot home for the last 50 years. This was 520 BCE after all.

Haggai exhorted people that they had better get on with this temple project. He attributed their current poverty and drought to the fact that the temple wasn't done. Haggai mentioned that you have sowed much and harvested little. You eat but never have enough. You drink but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves but no one is warm. You earn wages, but your pockets have holes.

The people needed a place to hold on to. A place to be grounded. Something that withstood the tests of time, a firm foundation a cornerstone that would sustain and protect and encourage them. In geopolitical terms, a temple showed that Israel's God was real and that the people were resilient. They would rise up and come back if there was a temple there. They would eventually make it a fortress with walls to protect the ancient city from the next wave of marauders.

Haggai's insistence on building the temple was even more practical. He believed that the Messiah had already been born and they were just a building away from his reign. Haggai put his Messianic hopes in Zerubbabel. But it wasn't to be.

What broken pile of stones need to be taken up? What powerful institutions lay in tatters? What hopes have been dashed? Who will take up the mantle and build something new, maybe even better having learned from the past?

Back in 1921 the 70-year-old church didn't want just a bigger building. They embraced a grand vision. No longer would it be just a neighborhood church called Olivet, but it would focus its energies on the transient student population, hence the new name. It was supported by the larger Baptist community across the state to have a unique ministry to the student population. It's instructive that before the sanctuary was built, the lower level gym was open and served as a recreation spot for students. Williams Arena didn't open until 1928. The building was big enough to house the offices of the Minnesota Baptist Convention. The sanctuary was not completed until 1927. This room was named after Dr. E.R. Pope who spearheaded the project as Executive Minister of the region but died before seeing it completed. Some say that the papal crosses in the woodwork are a tongue in cheek shout out to Dr. Pope.

The 1920's had their fair share of controversies, and one that embroiled the Baptists was Evolution. The fundamentalist and modernist controversies were in full force. And some prominent pastors called for defunding heretical Baptist institutions like Carleton College if they did not tow the line against evolution. This was after trying and failing to get the University of Minnesota to not teach it. Seems like a certain current controversy over the origin of our country and whether such heresy ought to be taught. One of the groups not willing to sign onto the anti-evolution creed was University Baptist Church. Subsequently the Minnesota Baptist Convention never moved into the building, and we lost the funding to build the fancy bell tower. We did some creative financing, got some long-term loans from the denomination that were not forgiven until about 18 years ago. We also started renting out some of the extra rooms.

Think of the other controversies over the past 100 years. A former student minister, Edwin Dahlberg led the Baptist Pacifist organization. He was ordained at Olivet in 1918. He later became the president of the national Council of Churches. There is an annual award for peacemaking in the denomination that bears his name, first given to Martin Luther King.

Around the time this building was built there was an active Temperance Union who saw it as God's mission to save people from the scourge of alcohol. Our current no alcohol policy might stem from that. Certainly our sacramental grape juice does.

The Conservative Baptist Convention formed taking most of the Minnesota Baptists in the 1947s. UBC decided to remain Northern (and later American) Baptist. We put a sign up in front of the church, saying a Liberal Church, which is not only a nod to an open-minded theology, but it also denoted we are not a part of the Conservative Baptist Convention. We keep it up there because it makes people do a double-take.

Over the years we entertained notions of merging with other Southeast Churches. For a variety of reasons it never happened, but we hold our partnership with our neighboring churches as vital. That is presently seen in joint worship services, musical collaborations and work like serving Every Meal bags at Marcy Open School and forming the University Area Sanctuary Coalition five years ago.

We have been blessed by some great preachers over the years.

John Bone was said to have conducted the choir while also preaching, perhaps at the same time.

When the 1964 march in Selma happened, we sent our pastor Ken Huyck down to march in Selma.

In the early 1970's David Bartlett spent less than three years here but made his mark as a challenging preacher, great scholar and a dynamic presence. People talk about his tenure as Camelot.

Lee Freeman was a great preacher, administrator and really embraced the liberal moniker of UBC. He was once asked if he believed in God. His witty response was I believe in God Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I don't believe in God Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Sundays are a toss-up.

We were the first church to hire an out lesbian pastor. Dr. Nadean Bishop interviewed here during the 1991 Halloween blizzard and decided to come here anyway. She led with grace and solidified a tradition of welcome to the LGBTQA community that continues to this day. We developed a deep appreciation for Emily Dickenson under her leadership.

But the ministry of this church is not about the pastors, but the people.

It was the people of UBC who became draft resisters.

It was the people of UBC who championed inclusive language and did the painstaking work of rewriting lyrics to hymns that put in more hers and made God-language and humanity language representative of everyone. One might say they were woke long before it became a trend or controversy.

It was the people of UBC who insisted on saying Our Father/Mother who art in heaven.

It was the people of UBC who formed the interfaith Housing Network which became Families Moving Forward.

It was the people of UBC who drove for meals on wheels.

It was the people of UBC who established Loaves and Fishes.

But not only that, it was the people of UBC that were leaders of the gray panthers.

It was the people of UBC that started the Minnesota Women's Press and the Minnesota Women's Psychologists group.

UBC was a charter member of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists way back in 1992.

It was the people of UBC that resettled refugees from Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Burma, Thailand and most recently Haiti and Honduras.

It was the people of UBC who established a sister church relationship with Second Baptist Church of Leon, Nicaragua. 41 of us have visited our sister church between 2003 and 2017. We hope to go back again sometime soon. We hear that there are vaccine clinics up and running across Leon.

It was the people of UBC who gathered around the Peace Pole in the early 2000s to pray every Sunday for peace as our nation prepared for and waged war in the middle east and we waged war with each other.

It was the people of UBC who were and are seekers of Shalom, for which we give an award every year.

It was the people of UBC who raised money and sent rebuilders to New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

It was the people of UBC that took to the streets during riots, but also opened our doors as respite for protestors.

This grand old building has seen changes over the years. It wasn't built with ramps or elevators in mind, but over the years we have installed both. It's now 80% handicapped accessible.

There are windows and electrical systems that have been upgraded. There is even a series of rain gardens doing their best to filter stormwater away from the Mississippi. It still needs some TLC, but the people of UBC have held it together and celebrated the people who have made their homes here, even if only for a little while.

We have housed artists, musicians, congregations, schools, therapists, writers and nonprofits over the years, too many to name, but their voices still echo, further hallowing these halls.

We were strike headquarters twice when clerical workers at the U demanded better wages in 2003 and 2007. We held classes in every available room and big meetings happened in the sanctuary. Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin spoke at UBC instead of her scheduled site because she didn't want to cross a picket line.

We have been a musical venue for students taking classes, the Minnesota Freedom Band, One Voice Mixed Chorus, Border Crossings, South African singers and dancers, and even a Sacred Harp convention or five. The Roots Cellar will hopefully resume concerts in the coming months. Did I mention the Southeast Community Orchestra led by Erasmus Meinerts and joining forces with other churches? How about Madrigal Feasts, liturgical plays, and an internationally touring bell choir?

The nature of a university church is that it is always reinventing itself. Students come and go, and veterans who have moved away find it increasingly difficult to get here. But there is something about this church in this place that faithfully (or stubbornly) witnesses to ancient stories and makes them come alive to a new generation. We look forward to the day when we can return here safely and share a meal and see each other face to face, recognizing a piece of God's puzzle is right here in the eyes of your pew-partner whether you know them or not.

Haggai said that the temple was necessary for the community's survival. I don't know if this building was absolutely essential (at least by Jerusalem standards), but it has been our little oasis of activism, passion, inspiration, laughter and tears. It's where we learn to live as the Apostle Paul suggested, "lives worthy of the gospel of Christ".

And so we celebrate this first hundred years of this building. But it was never about the building. It was about the saints that walked these halls and mystically inhabit this sacred space even today. If you listen close enough, you can hear them singing along with you. And that makes this space sacred.

Let me close with a poem by my colleague Meta Herrick Carlson called a blessing for peacemakers:

*Peacekeepers protect systems and
tell righteous anger to calm down
so the powerful can stay comfortable.*

*But peacemakers, well,
That's sacred rebellion. That's pushing
On mountains that don't feel like they are budging and inch.
Making peace can look foolish,
Can be called hysterical,
Can be mocked from a stage. But while some laugh,
Hard truth continues to rumble,
Change sneaks in, and the rebels who lost
Are already finding themselves again elsewhere.*

*There are stories about peacekeepers
And their hardened hearts. And then
There are stories of peace*makers*,
Whose hearts break open for the sake of Shalom.*

*We are always living in one of those stories,
So stay fools for making peace.
It is the only way.
It is both a brutal labor
And an ancient blessing.*

Amen.