

Sherrì Alms: Haggai and the Velveteen Rabbit

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Good morning. I believe in props, as those of you who saw me do the children's word know. What you see around me today are images of my teaching's theme, which comes from our Old Testament text as well as one of my favorite children's stories, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. What, you may wonder, does Haggai have in common with the Velveteen Rabbit? And furthermore what do those books have in common with a raggedy shirt, an old teddy bear and a couple of rocks?

That's why I'm up here – to, I hope, explain the common denominator to all of you. First, I'd like to read the text from Haggai again. In this text, God talks to the Israelites, who have been exiled in Babylon and whose temple, the greatest ever seen, has been leveled to the ground. God asks them if they realize that their temple, their former glory, their pride, is gone, nothing left of the magnificent place of worship, the center of Israel, you might say, their heart.

"Yet now take courage, all you people of the land...for I am with you. My spirit abides among you; do not fear," says God to her people. She promises to rebuild the temple and make it even greater than it was before. "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former," God says, "and in this place I will give prosperity."

When I first read this text, my heart sank. In the New

Testament, I had Jesus talking about which wife is married to which husband in the afterlife and here I had an old destroyed temple. What, I thought, am I going to talk about? There is nothing here. But as I procrastinated actually sitting down and writing the sermon, this word of Haggai's swirled around my head, entered my quiet time, and settled somewhere in my heart.

Heart. One of Webster's many definitions of "heart" is "one's innermost character, feelings, or inclinations." And the next definition is "the central or innermost part; the essential or most vital part of something." If you sit in silence for a few moments, as some of us did yesterday during the discernment process that Meg led us in, if you allow God to enter into the silence with you, you feel your innermost being, the deep core of who you are enter in. "This is who I am. I am playful, generous, and sad. I am called to work among the poor, with children. My deep joy is to paint pictures, to write stories, to bake bread."

What happens though when you are in the position that the Israelites of Haggai's time were in? When your innermost part, your essential center has been destroyed, razed to the ground, its precious contents plundered and taken away. What happens you look into your heart and all you see are ashes?

It sounds bleak, doesn't it? And I am known for being a tad more dramatic than perhaps is real but I think we have all had times in our lives when we have looked into our hearts and found a hearth where the fire has gone out and the candles have been extinguished.

Adrienne Rich wrote a poem called "Transcendental Etude". In one section, she expresses loss and heart-emptiness in a way that speaks to me every time I read it:

"...But there come times – perhaps this is one of them – when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;

*when we have to pull back from the incantations,
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,
and disenthral ourselves, bestow
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static
crowding the wires. We cut the wires,
find ourselves in free-fall, as if
our true homes were the undimensional
solitudes, the rift
in the Great Nebula.
No one who survives to speak
new language, has avoided this:
the cutting-away of an old force that held her
rooted to an old ground
the pitch of utter loneliness
where she herself and all creation
seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry
to which no echo comes or can ever come...*

That's why this shirt is up here. I used to wear this shirt to my office. It went with a suit I had, a very business-like suit for my business-like workplace. It looked better than it does now I assure you. When I took Deborah's class on Visual Midrash, she asked us to sit in silence for a while and then to create out of that silence. We were to use what we had in our homes. I had this shirt, a charred piece of wood and a lot of emptiness. After I was done, after I had taken it to the class, I kept it though I wasn't sure why.

Now I know. It was for this teaching. For me, I finally realized, this shirt symbolizes the way I felt while I was working at the American Bankers Association. And though the way I felt had much to do with the mere fact that I was working in this corporate, rat-race environment, it also had to do with the fact that during those years, every part of my life was absent one key ingredient – me. I felt as if the hearth and candles in my heart had been blown out by a cold

wind and there was nothing left to say who I was, the authentic me.

I was doing work I despised for people whose values bore little in common with mine. My spiritual life was shut down. I was without a church home and wasn't even sure what or who God was and I certainly wasn't speaking to her. Who speaks to a void? I was trying to work out what my relationship with my family was. And I was finding it mighty hard to make friends in this town full of temporary, ambitious and driven people.

In other words, I had no temple left. The silver, the gold, the beautiful pictures, the ornate candlesticks had been plundered or destroyed.

It was just what I needed. It was the only way I could begin again. I believe in resurrection. And I believe that resurrection is a miracle. But I don't believe that only Jesus was resurrected. I believe we are all resurrected many times in our lives but it often takes time carrying a cross or hanging from one to get to the place where the stone rolls away and we emerge new.

Mary Oliver wrote a poem, *Crossing the Swamp*, that speaks to this. This is an excerpt:

...Here
is *swamp*, here
is struggle,
closure—
pathless,
seamless,
peerless mud. My bones
knock together at the pale
joints, trying
for foothold,
fingerhold,
mindhold over

such slick crossings, deep
hipholes, hummocks
that sink silently
into the black, slack
earthsoup...

She doesn't make resurrection sound pretty, does she? That's because it isn't a pretty picture. Rebuilding requires demolition. When they put Jesus' body in the grave, it was already wounded, already beginning to decompose. From the depth of that darkness, from the stench and the blood came the mystery we call the resurrected Christ, light of the world, bread and wine for all. From desolation came plenty, from rot came growth.

I painted a line from another of Mary Oliver's poems on my kitchen cabinet. "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" I want to remember every day that I am living a resurrected life, a life I feel has been given to me by God. And for those of you out there who think this new life is perfect, I can only say "ha," because it isn't. I still get depressed; heck, I'm still in therapy and taking anti-depressants. I get angry. I don't talk to or listen to God. I disconnect from friends. But the point is through those bad times I still have a flame in my heart, the candles are lit and my self looks like a pretty good place to settle in for a while.

What happened? God changed my life. Pretty simplistic, I tell myself. God changed my life? Sound like I was born again. Are you waiting for me to say hallelujah, praise Jesus? Well, I just might. Except for this change to happen, I had to watch the temple of my self being torn down and let me assure you that I loved that temple. I had to watch as all the faux pieces I had created to defend myself from the world, from closeness to other people and to God were torn down, razed. I wasn't sure that I could be rebuilt and it took years of building to even get to here, this Sunday morning.

But today I feel whole. I've left my safe, secure, corporate job and made work for myself as a writer and editor. I have a wide circle of friends and loved ones, here in the area and scattered all over. I am remaking my relationships with my family and finding that I can love them in a less needy way, a more whole and more satisfying way. Best of all, I have a solid spiritual foundation, a home here at Seekers and a relationship with God that feels more real than any spiritual connection I've had in the past.

So now we come to the Velveteen Rabbit because in Margery Williams' tale of a toy rabbit lies the essence of resurrection for me. "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real." The skin horse told the Rabbit this when the rabbit was still new, plush, and loved. But it wasn't until the Rabbit was old, threadbare, and worn, like my childhood bear here, that the miracle of resurrection could occur. "And so the little Rabbit was put into a sack with the old picture-books and a lot of rubbish, and carried out to the end of the garden behind the fowl-house. That was a fine place to make a bonfire, but the gardener was too busy just then to attend to it." The Rabbit thought of what the Skin Horse had said to him about being real. "Of what use was it to be loved and lose one's beauty and become real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear trickled down his shabby little velvet nose and fell to the ground." A fairy comes then, and makes the Velveteen Rabbit into a real rabbit who goes off into the wood to live with the other rabbits, home at last.

That is how we rebuild our temples. Sure, it's nice to have soft velveteen skin, a shiny nose and pretty glass eyes. Sure, it's nice to live in a handsome wooden toy box and stay in a warm room all the time. But I don't think anyone would say that stuffed animals have very authentic lives. When God says

at the end of the Haggai text, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former ... and in this place I will give prosperity." I don't think She was talking about gold and precious jewels. I think She was talking about heart, that central, essential, innermost part of all of us. Our REAL parts, our resurrected spirits, the call that God gives to us to live as authentically as we can. In this way, we, like the Israelites, leave Babylon and weeping to come home again. Which is where these rocks come in. I often think of the rock that gushed water when Moses split it open for the Israelites wandering in the desert. And I think of the Biblical image of milk and honey flowing from an arid land. So I keep this rock, from Dayspring, in my house and stones like this one on my altar. Out of a rock like this can come something beautiful like this piece of quartz. But not until you break open the rock. Then you see the beauty, and then the light shines forth. "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. ... But those who do what is true come to the light..." (John 1:3-5 and John 4:21)