

“A Holy Shakedown”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler with Elder Cynthia Callahan

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

November 10, 2019

Haggai 2:1-15

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21

Our Psalm today declares, “The Lord watches over all who love God.” What a great line to frame this day, which is both Caregiver Appreciation Sunday, and Pledge Dedication Sunday. With God as the ultimate model for caregiver, we have some direction for how we care for the vulnerable in our community, and also how we care for this church. The Psalm describes a God who is “near to all who call,” who “fulfills the desires of those who fear God,” and who “satisfies the desire of every living thing.”

OK, God, here is a desire for you to satisfy: We need to bring in at least \$134,000 in pledges to accomplish our ministry goals for 2020. Go ahead, God of Majesty, do your thing. Oh, and by the way, we bless you and glorify your name forever. Your greatness is unsearchable. We know you will care for us.

Haggai also gives some inspiration for our Pledge Sunday. The prophet shares God’s promise: in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; ⁷and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. ⁸The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts.

The way I picture this is a holy shakedown. That is how I came up with the title of the sermon. But I had not really thought of where it would go, except the obvious conclusion: The Spirit swoops in, and unlooses the spare wealth of our community, until the gold and silver fills these offering plates, providing just enough for the ministry of our church, and maybe then some.

I asked Chris what she thought of when she heard the word *shakedown*. “I think of the mafia,” Chris immediately responded. Well, God as mafia boss isn’t exactly the tone I was going for. And so, I turned back to the bible, and more specifically, Haggai, who gives our prophecy for today.

Haggai is a tiny book, just 2 chapters, and his time as a prophet was short too, consisting of 4 sermons given between August and December of 520

BCE. The Persian king Cyrus the Great had released the Jews living in exile in Babylon back to their holy land, Judah. But what they came home to was not the milk and honey of their memories. Their buildings lay in rubble. Their fields were dust and weeds. Their governor and high priest encouraged them to rebuild their Temple, and they even had the blessing of the King of Persia to do so. They began to lay stone upon stone, but became discouraged and quit, convinced they would never recapture Jerusalem's old glory. So instead of sweating, they sighed. Instead of dreaming, they despaired.

Anyone familiar with the struggles of the contemporary church in America and many other parts of the world find this frustration familiar. For those in our church who have been here generations back, they remember the time when the side doors were an accordion wall that folded open into the Fireplace Room to accommodate all the overflow of people coming to worship here. Some may remember 60 teens coming from all the different congregations in town to have youth group at our church. You may remember when soccer games were never scheduled on a Sunday morning because the culture assumed that most families were going to church. You may dread the next dinner our church hosts, because most of the people who used to run the kitchen have retired and moved away.

Haggai had to figure out how to preach hope and restoration to a people who could only see what they had lost. And, let's be honest— their losses were not insignificant. He was speaking to his people to inspire care for their community. Cynthia Callahan is an Elder of our church and Clerk of our Session. But what you may not know about Cynthia is that she knows a lot about caregiving, the sweating and the sighing, the dreaming and despair. So I would like to ask Cynthia to weave her testimony into this sermon, before I get to words of hope and restoration.

Cynthia: When Karen asked me if I'd speak about my experience for this caregiving Sunday, I agreed while wondering if I were the right person and having no idea what I'd say. I thought I'd see where the spirit led me as I kept the idea on the back burner for a while. The back burner is where I do a lot of my thinking and planning because I'm the primary caregiver for my husband, Francis, as most of you know, who has dementia as a complication of stroke. I spend a lot of my time overwhelmed as I discover at the last

minute an aide isn't coming, try to get a doctor's note to get Fran excused from jury duty, prove to the tax folks or Medicaid that Fran's still disabled and we're still broke, or think of how I can prevent him from slipping off on his own when it's nice out and I have to go to a weekend rehearsal.

Molly and I are actors and spend a lot of time thinking about behavior and what it feels like to be other people. I wanted to say up front that no one can REALLY know what it feels like to be other people, even though as actors we try. My caregiving experience may be totally different from yours and I don't presume to speak for you. I just believe as an artist that particular individual details are what make a story feel universal and relatable to us, so I'll tell my story hoping that something may resonate with you and, if it doesn't, that it won't annoy you too much. When people started sending me books about stroke and caregiving and dementia, and I dug around myself, I was driven crazy by the caregiver writers who claimed that every day was a joy and they found so much fulfillment in caring, with infinite patience, for their person. I don't get it. I'm tired and pissed and sad and often two steps behind, frequently impatient, and certainly not resigned. I'm aware that statistically, caregivers are known to die, from stress-related causes, before the people they care for, and I'm actively thinking all the time how I can manage to beat those odds, only occasionally feeling tired enough that I'd be almost okay with it. If those people are telling the truth, I am not like them. However, they do not annoy me as much as people who occasionally tell me to have an **attitude of gratitude**. Now in the sister and brotherhood of caregivers that I have definitely found to exist, it's true that we've found that someone ALWAYS, ALWAYS has it worse than we do. We are never glad to discover this, as we don't rejoice in someone else's hard path, but I *think* it's weirdly comforting because if that person can survive their trip across the desert, we probably can too and I can be grateful for that. I am grateful for what I used to have, infinitely blessed. However, I refuse to be grateful that my husband, lover, and best friend left me in early January 2013. I just won't do it. I miss him every day, and I don't get to grieve for him because this person who looks a lot like him is in my house instead, like Invasion of the Body Snatchers, and I have to take care of him instead of going through a period of mourning for my actual husband and then, maybe, building a new life. I was intrigued by Leah's insight when she pointed out the reading for today, and the verse "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?" And then "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 what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory." A conversation I'd love to have with another caregiver, or maybe Leah, sometime is, where did that glory go and where is the person who lived in the house before? People with Alzheimer's seem to initially experience days when they connect to some degree with their former selves, before those selves slip away. But Fran *changed* into someone else. Will I see that person in heaven? Where is he? I don't know. I am anything but grateful for that. **But I don't think that's required of me.**

I was raised in a church going family, and I remember learning at an early age about agape love. The Greeks have different words for different kinds of love, and as I was taught it, agape is love that is shown by an action. It's universal and altruistic. And I can show agape love no matter how cranky I feel on a given day. I may not be able to find joy in my situation when I come home tomorrow night, but I can ask who Fran enjoyed arguing with at daycare, and watch Jeopardy with him before I start working on a project. People say things to me like "you're so strong," "you're so amazing," or in one case, "you're an angel" which is particularly untrue. If you only knew. As for being strong in particular, what else am I supposed to do? It's like having a broken leg and the doctor puts on a cast, if someone says "how do you bear it, you're so strong?" well, I wouldn't have much choice, my leg's broken so I'm wearing a cast, period. But one of my favorite, weird as this is, verses in the Bible is "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus on the cross. It is the only saying that appears in more than one Gospel. I deeply believe, if Jesus couldn't hang on the cross and say, hey, I'm really fine with this pain and sacrifice, it's important, I don't mind, bring it on," but rather basically said, help me, I want out, then I don't think He expects me to do any better. We don't have to be strong and cheerful about our struggle, we just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other because that's the only way forward, and practice agape love. And when I have a dark night of the soul, and howl at the moon, Jesus understands, so did He.

In case you have a caregiver in your life circle and are wondering how you might help them, again, everyone's different. But a dear friend of mine is a wonderful and established playwright. He also happens to be happily married and has been with his wife for many years, so between his experience and his gifted imagination, he has some idea of what my life is like and what is

missing for me now. He told me, “you need to use your grown-up voice.” I thought about this and realized how right he is. I cannot talk to Fran like the person he once was, intellectually and cognitively. This is true on an infinite number of levels, from not remembering someone we’ve known well to, at one point, having a discussion about Music Man, which is a movie we loved and saw a dozen times together but which we now can’t watch all the way through because he no longer understands metaphor and just thinks when the uniforms change to shiny new ones at the end as the band marches, it’s confusing and stupid. I have a special voice I use with him, developed unconsciously, as you might do in talking with your little child. My friend Jeff reminds me to get together with friends like him and talk about movies and politics and dreams and ideas and good comedy, and just use, in all the ways I can, my grown-up voice. Thank you for listening to my grown-up voice today, so I can go home and be a caregiver.

Leah: Cynthia, thank you for sharing your grown-up voice with us. You exhibit your gifts so beautifully with us, and we see your value as a caregiver, but also as an actor, a musician, a filmmaker, and with your role as Clerk of Session, you are often the peacemaker whom everyone trusts. We know your loss has shaped you, and we also see you as more than your loss.

Haggai was like Cynthia’s friend Jeff. He encouraged Judah to use their grown-up voice. He reminded them that their value is so much bigger than their loss. Because of his encouragement, and his promise that God will be with them, they picked up their tools, got to work, and built that Temple. They cared for it and for one another. But the truth is, the second Jerusalem Temple never recaptured the glory of the first one. In fact, the prophet Nehemiah reported that the enemies watching the walls being built laughed, saying “That stone wall they are building— any fox going up on it will break it down!”

In fact, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed again, but it took about 590 years before that happened. And I suspect that it lasted so long because they found something even more valuable than that building. It was their care for one another. And in the meantime, God was providing a different kind of restoration, a different way of meeting the people that would not require a building, but something that was not confined to one place and one

time. By coming to us as Jesus Christ, God found a way to take up residence in our flesh, showing us that hope, restoration, and even resurrection is possible, even in the face of vulnerability and death.

We care for fragile bodies; we care for fragile buildings; we care for fragile people, because God has been in all those fragile places. We know that because we see the fragility of the cross. And, we trust that in some corner of their fragility or our own, God takes up residence. God's Spirit even shows us we can prosper.

Friends, do you know how rich we are? If you were one of the 32 people who had a really fun night out at our Progressive Dinner this month, can you say an *Amen!* or a *Thank You Betsy*? Each year, we have newcomers arriving to worship with us, bringing their energy, faith and questions, leadership, and more than a few children, and you are indeed changing our church, but you are changing it for the better. The ways our church embraces music— whether through our choir, or the fact that ours is a church where the congregation wholeheartedly sings the hymns, or the fact that neighbors near and far come each month to groove with Foreign Exchange at our Jazz Jam, or that more Sundays than not Michael Hinton grabs a percussion instrument to give us a little soul to our songs is rich (by the way, he was invited to play today at Teaneck Presbyterian to help them celebrate Deacon Appreciation Day). Our church shows how rich it is in the ways our Deacons walk beside people in their joys and in their sorrows, and give evidence that God is with them just by showing up. Ours is the church known for its nurture of children not only in our wonderful Sunday School classes, but also in worship. And our English Conversation Program is one of many ways our church embraces a changing community that has become immigrant rich. No, our church does not look like it used to, and maybe that is a good thing. Our church gets the opportunity to live into the Beloved Community in ways our predecessors may not have imagined possible, but in ways that they absolutely laid the groundwork for. I could go on and on, but you get the drift.

We are rich because we know that even if the worst possible thing happens today, there are people here who will be there for you tomorrow, and the next day, until one day you are also able to believe in the ridiculous promises of our faith and join in testimony to God's restoration.

Each one of you brings a richness to our community that silver and gold cannot match. Ingrid Brennan wove together a representation of your gifts through our Stewardship Tapestry, made of cloth strips designed by you over this past month. Not one of us could have brought a single thread and made something so wonderful. It took all of our offerings.

We don't need a mafia boss to come in to shake down this congregation. The prosperity is already here. It is *you*. It is God's presence within you. You are so valuable. You are so beloved. Together, you can call forth a care of this church— its ministry, its building, its mission, its children— so that we in the church can care for one another, and in turn care for God's world.