



JOHN RODGERS WOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 12, 2017

Scripture: Haggai 2:1-9 and Acts 2:42-47

I bring you greetings from your mother, your mother church that is, First Presbyterian Church, known in its earliest days as the “Wall Street Church” founded in 1716, 301 years ago.

A few of our members are here today to celebrate with you this important 250th anniversary year in the life of the Brick Church. And what a happy occasion it is that in a time of American religious life when, according to the Pew Research group, church membership numbers are diminishing, mainline Protestantism is declining, and attendance in worship and church school is considered to be regular if people attend every six weeks – that Brick and First are celebrating within a year of each other 301 years as a congregation, and 250 years is quite a remarkable accomplishment.

I realize that you have been celebrating on several occasions already. President Craig Barnes, of Princeton Seminary has celebrated with you from this pulpit, Michael has preached an anniversary sermon, recently our friend and fellow presbyter Leslie Merlin returned, and I am the last of this anniversary’s preachers to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for the accomplishment of reaching the ripe old age of 250.

There are some sitting here who may, in fact, be present some day at the 300th anniversary of Brick Church (it’s possible), but they are the youngest among us, and having just passed a notable anniversary at Old First I can say with some assurance that there will only be a few of you who will be able to claim a fifty-year membership at Brick, and remember fondly this year of celebration.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream soon bears us all away, urban living, a transient society, and constant change always makes church membership fluid, but that we should mark this day and this year with gratitude and fondness is very important.

I read the history of John Rodgers and of Brick Church this past fall, and I feel a connection to the old saint Dr. Rodgers, whom we share as former pastor and moderator of our Sessions. In those days of Presbyterianism here in New York there was a formal collegial relationship between churches, and Old First, Brick and Rutgers remained in that collegial relationship with a common strategy and commitment to ministry until 1809.

I also felt a kinship to Dr. Rodgers when I read that in 1809 his memory started to fade, probably struggling for the name of that river that the poet Billy Collins cites, the “river whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall.” So, Dr. Rodgers began to use notes in the pulpit, and he preached his last sermon to the Brick congregation in September 1809, just shy of two years before he died in 1811.

John Rodgers’ life is worth noting in both of our church histories. During the Revolutionary War, he served as a chaplain in General Heath’s Brigade stationed in Greenwich Village. On July 14, 1776, a few days after word had reached New York that the Declaration of Independence had been signed he spoke to the young soldiers who would fight against the British at the Battle of Brooklyn Heights. The manuscript of that sermon and one preached earlier in January of that year were found in the basement of Old First tucked into a pile of moldy led-

ger books ready to be shredded.

After the war, Rodgers served not only as a patriot veteran, but was a chaplain to the New York State Constitutional Convention, and the first Legislature of the state. He was Vice-Chancellor of New York University, first Moderator of the new General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, a Trustee of the College of New Jersey (a familiar school just down the road South of here) now known as Princeton University, which, incidentally, links him by association to Aaron Burr who served as the second president of Princeton, and so connecting us to less than six degrees of separation to the Broadway play, Hamilton.

Imagine what it was like to be the founding pastor of the Brick Church some 250 years ago.

Think of New York, in those early days. Only 25,000 people living here at the time (no problem getting a taxi). The majority who were religious were Anglican, not Presbyterian with close ties to the Anglican Church in England.

British troops attacked and occupied the city. Many residents were leaving because the city was overtaken, burned, pillaged. Dr. Rodgers moved his family to Connecticut during the occupation of Manhattan and Brick Church became a military hospital. They were in a new country these American colonists and they did not know how things would go, or even if they might win the war.

The Brick Church was down on Beekman Street, with a pastor, John Rodgers, who had a passion for God and who wanted to see the gospel flourish and the churches he was serving succeed.

It was a hope and a dream for this young pastor, to love and serve God faithfully. And here we are 250 years later, enjoying the fruits of Dr. Rodgers' labors. Wouldn't he have something to say about this remarkable anniversary year!

It was interesting to discover that at the founding of the Brick Church, the passage we heard from the prophet Haggai was the text for Dr. Rodgers' sermon. And then, on the occasion of the 175th Anniversary of this congregation the then pastor, Paul Wolfe chose to preach from the same text that we read today, Haggai 2:1-9. That text is a fascinating choice, and Haggai an interesting selection of all the prophets for Dr. Rogers to quote on the occasion of the founding of this church. The theologian Timothy Simpson helps us understand the Biblical setting.

Haggai's moment in the sun was only about four months long. People have a hard time finding Haggai in the Bible. Jeremiah, he was not! But he plays a key role in the post-Exile life of Judah, the southern of the two kingdoms of Israel as it searched for a new identity after its return from Babylon.

Haggai gets his fifteen minutes of fame in 520 BC. The exiles had started returning to Judah almost twenty years before in 538 and they brought with them a mandate to rebuild the temple. But what happened was that the people returned and rebuilt their homes and gardens and crafts and tended their fields and flocks, but the temple still lay in ruins.

And it was in that context that the prophet Haggai became a voice speaking in the name of Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts. This is a reversal of the situation in 2nd Samuel 7 where King David, having defeated his rivals inside and out of Israel wanted to build a "house" for God, a temple. And God responded through Nathan that God didn't want a house. He shouldn't bother with a temple.

But that was in the time of David, the salad days of Israel's history, not Haggai's time of returning from exile where the temple lay in ruins, while all the townhouses were going up around it.

Moreover, Haggai had to contend with the memory of the older folks who could still recall the way the temple was before the Babylonians ruined it. They thought it could never be so great again. And every time they saw

that pile of rubble that used to be the temple, their hearts broke.

And this is where the old prophet Haggai made a masterful pivot. He painted a word picture of the splendor of the temple he saw in his mind's eye reassuring the people Judah that they could do this.

To the young and to the old Haggai spoke his prophecy with the pile of temple rubble in the background. And what did he say?

I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former....

Now let's not misunderstand Haggai's or Dr. Rodgers' use of this passage. There's no getting around the fact that Brick Church has been fortunate to be well supported by visionary and generous people who have made this sanctuary and this church a beautiful and enviable place. But it is not to opulence, wealth, or affluence that Haggai or Dr. Rodgers called this church; but rather faithfulness. That spiritual determination and commitment to accomplish something that honors God's name because it is faithful to the gospel.

Yes, Haggai points to the silver and gold that will adorn the temple and calls the mountains to shake and pour out that raw splendor. But most of all it's the people whom Haggai called to faith, and that later Dr. Rogers, envisioned at the founding of your and my church who are the real heart and soul of the faithfulness they were calling forth from their people.

In 1767, on that day that Brick Church was founded, they needed a temple on Beekman Street to be a place where people would gather, not because God wants a tent in which to dwell, nor because God needs a house as we do for shelter and warmth. How is it Luke puts it in the book of Acts? "...the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands."

We build these sanctuaries as an expression of our commitment to God and our readiness to express with our actions the faith in our hearts. Sometimes we build glorious temples, like this one and the one I serve. But tents of meeting and temples in Judah come in many sizes and shapes, and all are expressions of the love and commitment of their members.

I saw this so clearly not too long ago. Our church recently established a sister congregation relationship with a church in Taquasco, Cuba. The friendship began with a visit to several churches in Cuba six years ago when a group from our congregation traveled there on a mission trip.

The mission was one of friendship and listening and volunteering. Mostly we were making friends, discovering what it is like to be a Cuban Presbyterian.

We heard some fascinating stories, but none that moved me more than this story.

Starting with the revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro and the Cuban government initiated a period of hostility toward the church as Cuba officially became an atheist state.

Anyone who was religious was considered either deluded or untrustworthy. And no one who was a practicing Christian could be promoted in their work, nor entrusted with responsibility. Children in school who were Christian were singled out and ridiculed.

Many Cuban Presbyterian pastors fled to the U.S. taking their Presbyterian (U.S.A.) pension benefits with them and many congregants left the church altogether in those days. Starting in 1961, churches began to fall on hard

times and into disrepair. Only a handful of people still came to church or professed their faith. All property in Cuba including churches was nationalized and any building that was not used on a daily basis was closed or confiscated by the revolutionary government.

On Sunday mornings in many Presbyterian churches in Cuba there might be only one person in church with one pastor. And during the week one or two people, mostly elderly women, would open the doors each day, sweep the church with a broom, sit and pray, sing a hymn, read scripture for a while and then leave the church, locking the door behind them, all for the purpose of keeping the church building in use every day and preventing it from being confiscated.

Many people thought that the church would be dead within five years. No one in their right mind would imagine that the Cuban Presbyterian church could have survived through this bleak time. And many died over the next thirty years not seeing any hope of change except from afar, until April 2nd, 1990 Fidel Castro met with leaders of 70 religious groups in Cuba and as a result of that meeting one word was changed in the country's constitution. The constitution no longer defined Cuba as an "atheist" nation, but rather as a "secular" nation. And that one-word change made it possible to be Christian again.

In the wake of that, something happened that was a real trial for the long-time members of the congregations. People who had been afraid of being openly Christian, who did not want to be ridiculed, who wanted to move forward in their jobs and not be held back, these people who had left the church when the times were bad started to come back to church, and it was difficult for those who had kept the church going through the lean years to accept them.

It was like the problem in the early church where the Jews had to learn to accept the Gentiles who were not, as far as they were concerned, worthy of God's love and forgiveness – who were unclean, and so were not included in the covenant of God's people.

At first there was grumbling and unhappiness about the long time that these people had been gone, and their sudden piety in the face of an easier time to be Christian. The faithful called the returnees hypocritical – fair weather Christians.

And while it was tempting to be hostile to those who had been away, those who had been faithful – the ones who had swept the church each day, and had come on Sunday with only one or two others, and who saw the church through the hard times, one by one came to accept and welcome back those who had not been faithful. Those who had hidden during the atheistic years.

The temptation for the faithful was to be self-righteous, exclusive, indignant, unwelcoming. But by the grace of God they came to welcome back those who had been afraid; because by the grace of God they believed that if they were really going to be a church, it had to be more than just keeping the doors open and preserving the buildings. It was more than having a place to gather, it was important that they live a life of forgiveness, faithfulness, and hospitality, for those of little faith and for those of great faith together.

Well here we are in your 250th year. And over the years you, like Old First, have had a peripatetic journey. Beekman Street to Fifth Avenue and 37th Street, union with the Church of the Covenant, union with the Park Avenue Church, and finally the move to 91st and Park.

I am sure that Dr. John Rodgers, our mutual pastor would have something to say today if God were to grant him the gift of speech on this occasion. I don't know whether he would use as his text the words of Haggai 2:1-9 or whether perhaps he might quote from the book of Acts about how God does not dwell in houses made with human hands. But that Dr. Rodgers would call us to faithful service, continuing witness, kindly deeds, and brave

faith seems to go without saying.

So, let me say it, I think Dr. Rodgers would be very proud of this church in these days, and that he would ask God's continued care upon you, upon all of us Christians in these secular days, that this church, this presbytery, and all God's people might flourish in faith and witness powerfully in the years ahead.

Open the doors, sing the hymns, sweep the floors, come to services, say your prayers, keep the faith in lean and ample years. And may God continue to bless this church and all who have gone before you who worship with us today but on another shore and in a greater light; all those who are here now, and all those who are yet to come. See you at the 300th!

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<sup>1</sup> I am quoting and paraphrasing Simpson's exegesis of the Haggai text found in "The Politics of Managing Expectations," *Political Theology Today: A forum for interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue*. November 4, 2013.