

Nov 29,2020  
Rev Jane Florence  
Title: Born to Set thy People Free  
Text: Haggai 2:4-7



He was born the 18th child in the family. When he was only fifteen months old, his home was set on fire by someone angry at his father. The child almost died, but a maid rescued him. In the early 1700s, life was hard in England. Employment was uncertain. Housing was inadequate; more lived in poverty than not. Sanitation was primitive; slums of filth and squalor were home to most. Nourishing food was scarce. Disease was rampant especially for the poor. Life was insecure. People were told to accept their lot in life.

Charles was fortunate. The boy grew and he was given education and privilege that many of his time were not. Seeing the desperation of others all about, Charles suffered great doubt, and he struggled to find direction and purpose in his life. In the end, he entered the family business. His father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather, even his brothers were all priests in the Church of England. Charles Wesley was known more for the 7,000 hymns he wrote than the parishes served. Including a Christmas favorite "Hark the Herald Angles Sing," an Easter favorite, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," and today's Advent hymn "Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus."

While surrounded by the desperate living conditions for so many around him and reading the prophet Haggai, he found inspiration for today's opening song. Haggai is not a well known prophet or book of the Bible. It's tucked in with the 12 prophets that don't get big notice, and the whole book only takes two pages of your Bible. Haggai speaks to people who have seen tough times about five hundred years before Christ. Almost all of the nation's population were taken captive and relocated on foreign land for seventy years. When the Empire that took them as prisoners was defeated, a new Empire came into power and said, "Y'all go home. Here's some money to get there and some to help you get started again." Persia set the people free, let them go home and prosper, and the Empire can gain more from their subject's wealth than their enslavement.

People went home to a place three generations had never known as home. They returned to the city of Jerusalem which was destroyed and left in ruin for almost a century. They started fixing up houses, repairing fences, planting crops, producing goods, getting on with life. Houses, fences, crops, goods.. something is missing from that list. These are Israelites, God's people. God delivered from slavery. God gave them land. It is YHWH God they worship. When Haggai speaks to them, they have been back home about 20 years; they have forgotten who they are. Prophet Haggai says. "excuse me... haven't you forgot something? Remember who you are? You have spent twenty years fixing your homes and you walk past a ruined temple every day. No one has lifted a finger to clear the rubble that was once a mighty temple of YHWH. The temple was more than a building in their culture; the temple represented God's presence in the middle of their lives.

*So Haggai speaks for the Lord saying, "take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, My spirit abides among you; do not fear"*

Charles Wesley based one of his most popular hymns on words that spoke courage in the face of fear and strength in the face of hardships. It is a call to remember who we are and whose we are and our strength with God as our center.

Last week I spoke about the fears that can steal away our Thanksgiving. It is easy to focus on the challenges of 2020; it's easy to be consumed by our fears. Again our scriptures and our faith songs speak to our human need and longing, "save us from our fear." Charles Wesley wrote words we just sang,

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,  
born to set thy people free;  
from our fears and sins release us,  
let us find our rest in thee.*

We start our Advent season today naming our fears and all which holds us back. Set us free from our fears and brokenness. Set us free upon this Advent journey of life.

To start on a journey, first, you must first recognize that there is a journey. To start on a journey to freedom, to escape from a prison, you must first realize you are in prison. We can't escape if we don't know how we are bound. We can easily live in the prisons of culture and mind, the illusion of reality, so to begin process, we begin by realizing there is something beyond. We are beginning to 'see through the veil' as the Apostle Paul put it.

*Israel's strength and consolation,  
hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear desire of every nation,  
joy of every longing heart.*

The journey is not about acquiring something external. It is shedding veils to come back to our deepest being, returning to our heart, soul, the Christ consciousness, born in us. Lying within each human being is the full spirit of God. When we want to approach God, we travel in to sacred center. Blaise Pascal claimed that "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every person that cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator." [13]

Charles Wesley brings together ancient and modern notions human yearning for freedom, our need for peace in our spirit, our longing for God within our souls. Advent is a season of celebration of Emmanuel, Christ, God with us,

*take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you.*

We are in a season of naming Emmanuel, I AM WITH YOU, says God. It is the I AM of God visible in the Cosmic Christ entering human life as Emmanuel who sets us free, freeing us from the mighty fears of 2020, frees us from the mighty sins of racism, poverty, greed, deceit. Gives us hope, all the earth, every nation, all peoples for it is what every heart longs for, what our scriptures proclaim, what our songs announce, what Jesus shows us: Emmanuel, God is with us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.