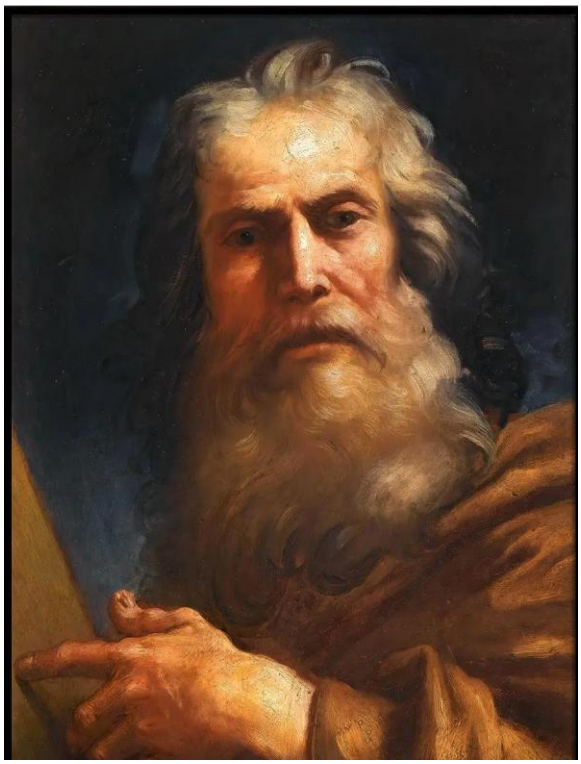
LEFTOVERS



From the Scroll of the Prophet Haggai (1.15) "In the second year of King Darius . . . the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: --- Speak . . . to the remnant of the people, and say, 'Who is left among you that saw this house (of God) in its former glory?'"

Just before the Hebrews entered the Promised Land after their long Exodus in the Sinai dessert, there was a climactic scene with Moses instructing the people of Israel to initiate a new ceremony, one meant to acknowledge God's part in the story of their escape from Egypt and their securing of a homeland. The ceremony, now generally known as the Feast of First Fruits, was

intended to establish the Hebrews as a people of thanksgiving. They were told to take the first of all the fruit of the ground, when they harvested for the first time in the Promised Land, and present those first fruits to the Lord. Thus, in this way their blessings and their homeland would not be taken for granted, and would be seen instead rather as a gift from God. The celebration also reminds the people of Israel, that they will soon become settlers in the Promised Land, whereas their ancestors were once all wanderers, wandering Arameans, but that ***their*** lives will be rooted in this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and that their lives would be blessed and secure.

It is a lesson that we in this country could well learn, I think, as our ancestors were all once wanderers too, immigrants of one sort or another. Many came here looking for better pastures or a better life, while others were brought here against their will. But here we all are, in a prosperous and free country. We, like those ancient Israelites, are indeed blessed. And Moses was clear, that when the Hebrews reached the Promised Land, they were to thank God for their freedom and to thank God for their new home. They were to thank God by simply taking the first-portion of their harvest each year and laying it before the altar of God in thanksgiving. And as they did so, they were to recite the ancient narrative of who they once were: of their origin in bondage, and of their freedom in grace.

But few of us Americans really do anything like that. Few of us stop and give thanks to God for the blessed lives we all live. And few of us give God the first fruits of our labors. We are much more likely to give God, I imagine, not the first fruits, but only the leftovers, that which we don't really want or need. ---- For example, most of us don't usually wake up in the morning and start first thing by praising God for the blessings of a new day. We, I suspect, are much more likely to say instead some short prayers at the end of the day, just before we fall off to sleep, when we are tired and spent, praying with the last bit of our energy, not the first --- if we pray daily to God at all. Few of us give God the unblemished sheep in our flock or the prized heifer. We don't give God the first of all the fruit of the ground, or even the first dollar of our labor, which we often frame and put up upon our own walls. We don't give God the biblical tithe of the first 10% of our earnings, no, we are much more likely to look into our wallets and purses afterwards, after we have spent our money on ourselves and then see what remains, and give a portion of *that* to God, if we give God anything at all. We don't dedicate ourselves to God's service either, as the ancient Israelites did; we usually are most reluctant to step up to help at church, and often do so only when pushed or prodded in some way or

another, usually motivated more by a sense of guilt than thanksgiving, I fear.

We are more often spectators and consumers of God's grace, when we are meant to be providers of it to those less fortunate than ourselves. We don't even always keep the Sabbath day holy, especially when it conflicts with *our* own wants and needs, like our desire to sleep in perhaps, or to stay warm, or to go to soccer practice. No, my brothers and sisters, we do not give God his due. We are not really a people of thanksgiving, I fear, despite the upcoming holiday. Oh, we might feel thankful for the wonderful lives we enjoy, but we don't usually thank God for that. Instead, we imagine that we are self-made men and women, getting what we deserve. We simply do not bring forward to the altar of God a basket of the first fruits of our labors. We are more likely to bring forward only our leftovers, the discarded bits and pieces of our lives, our loose change, the remnants, not the best fruits.

Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that our congregations are shrinking and our buildings are crumbling. It isn't from want of qualified clergy, or from lack of capable lay leadership, or an absence of need for the ministries in our community. We are starving our churches of the funds and the energies they need to function effectively in a changing and complex world. We still so often expect wonderful music programs and active Sunday

Schools, even when we cannot afford full-time clergy or choir directors, or a parish secretary or a sexton even. We are keeping too much of the harvest for ourselves, I fear. If God gets anything, it is mostly the scraps that fall from our tables.

But we can change that. We can change the way we live our lives. We can change the nature of our relationship with God. That is what Stewardship Sunday is really all about, finding ways to better become the people that God is calling us to be, to be the good stewards of God's grace in the world about us. This should be our Feast of the First Fruits then. For we are all of us called by God, called to use the gifts and talents given to us by God, for the reason they were given to us, for the benefit of our community and those in need. The Greek word 'ek-kle-sia' from which we eventually get the English word 'church' does not refer to a building, but to a group of people, a congregation that is literally 'called out' by God, to be settlers here and not wanderers, to be blessed and to share their blessings with others. We too are 'called' by God to use the good life that God has given to each of us to further God's mission and ministry in this community and in the world. It is principally why we are here, I believe. All together we are the Body of Christ. We are not called to just be members of the church*; **we are called to be the Church***. We are not meant to be

pew potatoes, who come here once a week or so to sit quietly in our places, simple spectators of the worship and music of this congregation, simple consumers of the programs and fellowship of this parish. No, each one of us is 'called out' by God to do our part, to give back to God a share of our time, and our talents, and our treasure, all given to us by God, the first fruits of our labors, in thanksgiving to God for the lives we have, lives flowing with milk and honey. Each one of us is 'called' to take an active part in the ministry here of this congregation!

So, are we doing that? Are we committed to each other here, to this ecclesia, and to our mission and ministry in this place? Are we coming to church on Sundays, because we know that we are God's people, blessed and called, and we thank God for that? Are we committed to serving our community in one of the numerous opportunities this congregation provides for us to do so, donating groceries to our local Food Bank to feed the poor, giving blood to help the sick and suffering, assisting with the Literacy Volunteers to welcome the stranger in our midst, or staying a night at the Winter Homeless Shelter to protect the destitute and downtrodden, or assist with our refugee families' resettlements, or simply serving on a board or a committee of this parish that furthers and manages these activities? Are we stepping up as needed? If so, why is it so hard to find people here sometimes to help, if we really value these activities? And

last of all, are we committed to financially supporting this church, with a realistic pledge of the first fruits of our labor, and not just the leftovers of our lives? I can survive on your 'leftovers,' because I am retired and a pensioner. What happens when I leave?

There was a warning in Moses' instructions that if the people of Israel failed to thank God for his blessings, then they could lose the Promised Land, and wander lost in the world like so many others in our communities today, ungrateful, self-centered, uncaring of the alien amongst us, blind to the needs of the poor, and focused instead solely on themselves. In which direction are we moving in our own lives, and in this parish?

Today is Stewardship Sunday at St. John's. Each and every person at our services today is invited to fill out a 2026 pledge card so that the Vestry can figure out a realistic budget for our work in the year ahead. You will be getting a letter from the Vestry this week to encourage your support of this ecclesia. And each and every person here will also encouraged to join the Capital Campaign that begins in the Spring to help restore our building and to publicly show our support of the ministry of this parish for years to come, to keep the mission alive at a time when so many parishes are closing. The Vestry and I want everyone to take ownership of this place, to take an active part in the life of this congregation, to help rebuild

this church, both literally and figuratively. So be realistic in what you pledge, increasing it a little each year perhaps, as Lisa and I once did in order to reach the biblical tithe in our giving. I have pledged again $6,000 to this church next year, and Lisa has done similarly with her parish. Combined that's a little more than 10% of our taxable income. I challenge you to do the same, even if it takes a few years to get there, as we all struggle, struggle to become the generous, thankful people God is calling us to be. Amen.