

THE LORD ALMIGHTY SAYS, “BUILD MY HOUSE”

Haggai 1:2-14

The Bible, or Book of books, consists of 66 books; 27 in the New Testament and 39 in the Old Testament. Some are longer than others. For instance, Isaiah has 66 chapters and other books are quite short, only one chapter long. . Next to Obadiah, Haggai is the shortest book in the Old Testament, only two chapters, but its teachings are no less significant. What do you know about the book of Haggai? Haggai is one of the minor prophets. And if you have been in my catechism class, you would know that the last four books of the Bible have a sort of rhythm – Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. “Haggai” means “festal,” which may indicate that the prophet was born during one of the three pilgrim festivals. He may have witnessed the destruction of Solomon’s temple. If so, he would have been about 70 years old when he served as God’s spokesman.

Maybe you remember that because of their idolatry and immorality the Lord allowed Israel to be conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Then for the same reasons he permitted the Babylonians to capture some Judeans in 605 B.C. and finally allowed all of Judah to be captured in 586 B.C. But through the prophet Isaiah and others the LORD promised a remnant would return. The story of the return from exile is told in the Book of Ezra. The Lord caused Cyrus, king of Persia, to conquer the Babylonian king and a few years later he issued a proclamation that permitted the Jews to return to their land and rebuild God’s house. Haggai was a prophet who, along with Zechariah, encouraged the returned exiles to rebuild the temple of the Lord. Martin Luther writes, “**Haggai is the first prophet given to the people after the Babylonian captivity, and by his prophecy the temple and the worship of God were set up again.**” (Concordia Self-Study Bible, p. 1406) Today we will look at our text from Haggai by using the theme, **THE LORD ALMIGHTY SAYS, “BUILD MY HOUSE.”** Do not succumb to enemies, consider your ways and recognize that the Lord is with you.

Haggai was a real historical prophet. He wrote his book at a certain time in history. The Lord called him to speak and record His words to people who were living actual lives with unique problems and dangers. Time and time again God’s prophets declared, “**This is what the LORD Almighty says.**” Yet, it was no easier for Zerubbabel and Joshua to believe that the Lord was really speaking to them than it is for us today when pastors and teachers tell us, “**This is what the LORD says.**” Zerubbabel and Joshua saw Haggai the person, a man with peculiarities and weaknesses like any other human. But the amazing thing is that they trusted he spoke the Lord’s words. This is the miracle

of the message: that a pastor who is obviously a sinner stands before you and proclaims God’s words and by God’s power you believe it.

The Lord directed the Jews to rebuild the temple and the rebuilding initially began with success in 536 B.C. But some of the people said, “**The time has not yet come for the Lord’s house to be built.**” How easy it is to procrastinate with the Lord’s work. How seemly impressive are the reasons for waiting. Why provoke the Persians? Why be so concerned about building an impressive temple right out in the open? Maybe it would be better to keep our personal religion to ourselves. We should think of how this will affect our children. After all, the Persians have the nasty habit of impaling trouble makers on beams. The reasons were multiple, but possibly the real reason the people waited is found in verse 4, “**Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruins?**” In other words, the Lord is saying, “**You aren’t building my house because you are too busy building your own.**” While they were lining their own houses with cedar and making valuable home improvements, the Lord’s house was desolate. So work on the temple was suspended for 15 years.

Do you have any projects going on around the house? If you are like me there is always some job that could be done to improve the home. The Lord wanted his people to have a sense of urgency about rebuilding his house. They were to devote time, abilities, and shekels to that top-priority project. About 175 years ago a group of Christians worked diligently to build a small house of worship for the Lord. When that building needed repair, the group looked for land on which to build a new church. So in 1852 forefathers of this congregation purchased land on this hill and began to build the sanctuary we are worshiping in today. This church was completed in 1853 as the colored glass window above the entrance confirms: “**St. Jacob’s Gemeinde 1853.**”

While a construction company could have built the church then, I doubt it. Considering the time and the materials, the members of the congregation probably took part. Like many barn raising events of the past, many workers and simple machines hoisted huge timbers into place, while numerous women prepared food and drink for the workers. Back then they didn’t have power saws and drills; they didn’t have scissor lifts and nail guns. They easily could have made excuses not to build. “**It will be too hard. It will cost too much. The weather is too cold or hot.**” But former members of this congregation contributed generously, worked and persevered as the Lord blessed their efforts. Do we think, “**The time has not yet come for me to increase my offerings for our church and its outreach. Maybe next year?**”

Among us the love of possessions and entertainment can be a genuine threat to building Christ’s kingdom. On average only 3% of our income

is given as offerings to the Lord. Materialism and consumerism lead us to neglect church building projects or keep us from assisting God in adding new “stones” to the Lord’s church. This makes the church’s Architect very sad.

Haggai tells us to consider our ways. The LORD Almighty states it this way, **“You have planted much physically, but have harvested little spiritually.** You have eaten, but are never satisfied. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes to keep warm, but still are spiritually cold. **You work hard to earn wages, only to see them vanish in expenses like a pocket with holes in it.”** This is a vivid picture of the emptiness and futility of the self-seeking life that forgets God. “The more you work for yourself, the less you will have. The more you work for God, the more you will have.” This reminds us of Jesus’ words to the rich fool in last Sunday’s lesson, **“A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”** (Lk 12:15). **“He who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God”** (Lk 12:21) is certainly putting his money into a bag full of holes. He will find no storehouse so secure that the Lord’s breath will not blow his treasures away.

Through Haggai the Lord still speaks to us today. The thought “consider your ways” is repeated several times in this book. Like the exiles in our text the Lord has blessed us with many resources. We have innumerable tools to make our lives much easier than 175 years ago. In a time of the greatest personal riches and per capita wealth that the world has ever seen, many churches’ income levels are declining. In a country that has been blessed with more material blessings than possibly any country in history, the church often goes begging. Building projects drag on and stumble. Modest mission proposals teeter. We hedge in our offerings because we see debt or meager finances and chose to pinch on supporting the Lord’s house. People don’t give and work for God like they should, because they think that by doing so they will lack necessities. Can we claim to be struggling more than the exiles who returned to Jerusalem? The Lord wants us to watch how we live. He wants us to evaluate what we do and why we do it. He holds us responsible for how we manage the treasures He has given to us.

The Lord provides the remedy in verse 8. **“Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so I may take pleasure in it and be honored.”** The Lord urges them to work for his glory and not for their own. The outlay of time, money, thought, and strength offers value to the gift. A gift which may be modest and ordinary to a stranger is considered a prize to the one who knows the work and effort that produced it. So it is with the Lord’s house. Our church may not be a cathedral or a mega-church with every amenity. Our congregation may not have the most eloquent or talented people

as members. Our efforts to preach and teach may not be carried out with finesse and flair. This is the Lord’s house. We call it that and so does God. Because it was built in love this house of worship is glorious. Whether our brothers in a foreign land build a mud-block structure or a WELS church erects a 5 million dollar church with stained-glass windows, our goal is not to draw attention to our-selves but to please and glorify our merciful Lord in a building where his people can be blessed through his Word and sacraments.

The reason it is pleasing and glorious is not because of all the money we have provided for it over many years, but because Jesus Christ, our Savior, made our salvation his first priority. Jesus left the glories and riches of heaven to endure the cross and the grave. The Bible describes it this way, **“Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”** (2 Cor 8:9).

Finally, the Lord wanted the exiles to rebuild the temple as a place where God chose to dwell. The leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua responded and the returnees listened to and obeyed the LORD’s voice through the prophet Haggai. The Holy Spirit inspired them to forget all their destructive fears and desires and led them to revere the Lord. Here fear doesn’t mean they were trembling and afraid of God. Instead, with renewed faith, they found renewed awe and respect for their Lord. The exiles set aside fear of their enemies and upgrading their homes and put axes and saws, sledgehammers and chisels to work. Twenty-four days after Haggai delivered his message workers resumed quarrying and logging to supply building materials for the temple reconstruction project. The Lord assured the exiles, **“I am with you.”**

The miracle of the message continues. Haggai was an ordinary man, different only because of his divine call from the Lord. The people said, **“This isn’t just Haggai speaking. This is the Lord himself. We had better listen to him.”** The Lord assures them and us of His presence, **“I am with you.”** He wants to make his dwelling with us. He stands at the door of our heart and knocks. His work is not easy. There will be godless opposition, but our Lord is on our side. He urges us to build his church, spread his Word and proclaim his holy name. His name Immanuel assures us that God is with us.

Movies today love to show destruction -- cars crashing, bombs exploding and buildings imploding. The Lord loves spiritual construction projects. The Lord Almighty wants us to build his house, proclaim his forgiveness, share his love, and trust in Christ the Cornerstone of our faith. Amen.