

ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH-Red Bud, Illinois

Adult Bible Class

Haggai: "Build God's House!"

Introduction:

In an interview with *World* magazine (June 6, 2009), former parish pastor Brian Kluth, author of 40 Day Spiritual Journey to a More Generous Life, describes his self-appointed task as a "generosity minister-at-large": "We're in the midst of a 40-year decline in Christian giving. And we're also in the midst of a global economic downturn. But I'm encouraged by the book of Haggai. God allowed cold economic winds to blow so that God's people would re-focus on giving to God's work. Those cold winds ended up being a blessing to God's people."

Historical Setting of the Babylonian Exile:

605 BC King Nebuchadnezzar deports the best and brightest of Judah's young people to Babylon (Daniel)

597 BC Nebuchadnezzar deports the skilled craftsmen and professional people of Judah to Babylon (Ezekiel)

587 BC The Babylonians conquer Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and take the people into exile

October 539 BC King Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon (prophesied in Jeremiah 25:12)

Isaiah 45:1 and 13 This is what the Lord says to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of...I will raise up Cyrus in My righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild My city and set My exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty.

538 BC Cyrus issues a proclamation that all exiled peoples can return to their homeland

536 BC 42,000+ exiles of Judah arrive in Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor (descendant of David) and Joshua the high priest (descendant of Aaron)

Rebuilding the Temple:

When studying the minor prophet Haggai the place to begin is, of course, with the book of Ezra. This book, written about 450 BC, tells the story of the rebuilding of the temple. The people got a good start on the project. They cleared the rubble of the destroyed temple. "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord" (Ezra 3:3). Then they made arrangements for construction: "Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia" (Ezra 3:7). While many were happy when the foundation of the new temple was laid, the older ones who remembered the former building were saddened by how much smaller it would be compared to Solomon's temple (Ezra 3:12).

No good deed goes unpunished. The neighboring Samaritans (descendants of the peoples the Assyrians imported to the area after they conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC) offered to help with the rebuilding. Zerubbabel and Joshua recognized the religious differences between their two peoples and rejected this offer of assistance (would be considered politically incorrect today). "Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:4-5).

In 530 BC King Cyrus died in battle. Since he was a supporter in the rebuilding of the temple his death added to the loss of momentum in completing this project. The next Persian king, Cambyses, was not interested in the temple being rebuilt. His troops marched through Judah on military expeditions, plundering the land and sending the economy into a depression. In 522 BC Cambyses was killed in battle and Darius succeeded him as king. In an effort to spur the local economy with government stimulus money Darius ordered that special projects be built, including construction of the temple (Ezra 6:8b) (no concern with the separation of church and state here).

Haggai the Prophet:

Now into the picture comes this otherwise unknown man, Haggai. His name means “festive.” His prophetic work is limited to five separate and very specifically dated prophecies that took place over a four month time period in the year 520 BC. At this time Zechariah also was prophesying to the people of Judah about this very same matter, the rebuilding of God’s temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra 5:1-2 Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua, son of Jozadek set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.

When the local Persian governor questioned this project (see the letter from Tattenai to Darius in Ezra 5:7ff.) King Darius responded by reaffirming Cyrus command to rebuild the temple (see the return letter in Ezra 6:3ff.). “Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it” (Ezra 6:11). Obviously, this letter encouraged the local officials to support the project.

“What is So Important About the Temple?” or “Why Do I Have to Go to Church?”:

If the Temple already had been in ruins for decades, and the people were not going to be able to replicate the majesty of Solomon’s Temple, why bother rebuilding it? Why not use the money for other things? (e.g. missions, social programs, etc.)

The Temple was the place of God’s promised presence for the forgiveness of His people’s sins. The God of the universe, who is present everywhere, promised to be present in this place as the location of His merciful forgiveness. The Temple is the place where God has put His name.

1 Kings 6:12-13 “As for this temple you are building, if you follow My decrees, carry out My regulations and keep all My commands and obey them, I will fulfill through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon My people Israel.”

1 Kings 9:3 “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before Me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting My Name there forever. My eyes and My heart will always be there.”

Today the place of God’s promised presence for the forgiveness of our sins is located in His written Word of the Holy Bible and the sacraments that His Son Jesus has given to us, Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. When this Word is proclaimed and taught and these sacraments are administered in Christian worship we know that God is present among us in our houses of worship to forgive us of our sins. Thus the worship and the place that this worship is done are sacred acts and places.

Haggai Chapter One:

Verse 1: Darius is the King of Persia. Zerubbabel is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:27. The name Joshua (Hebrew) = Yeshua (Aramaic) = Jesus (Greek).

v. 2: What are the people really saying here with this excuse that the Lord repeats?

v. 3: What had become the priority of the people? _____ (Think of the example of the German Lutherans who immigrated to America in the middle of the 19th century. Despite their difficult circumstances, they built a place for Christian worship and the education of their children first. Only then did they build houses for themselves.)

v. 4: “paneled houses” What does this tell us about the effort the people had put into building their own houses? _____ (In the Hebrew this same word was used for Solomon’s temple in 1 Kings 6:9, 15; 7:37 and a king’s palace in Jeremiah 22:14).

The challenge that the prophet Haggai presents to us today is this: **Will we allow the ministry of God’s congregation to suffer financially so that we can surround ourselves with the luxuries of this world?** The neglected temple was not a result of the demoralized condition of the people, it was a symbol of it. A spiritual revival will take place among the people once they are spurred into action to rebuild the temple.