

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Haggai 2:9, NRSV.

⁹ The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

Renewing the Temple.

Our church was built in 1892, which makes it old for a western U.S. church. It originally served a tight-knit, poor coal mining community. We are in the early stages of significant under-the-cover renovations. The church itself was very well-built, especially by standards of the time. We're told by the engineers who have studied our traditional white structure with a simple bell tower that the builders used high-quality lumber and good construction techniques. Tremendous care went into its construction, and I am sure that the congregation was excited to be providing a symbolic home for God. Over the last century and a third, several generations of people have presented themselves to God in our sanctuary.

There are two so-called "minor" prophets from the Book of the Twelve whose focus is on rebuilding the Temple after the Babylonians destroyed it. The Persians had conquered the Babylonians, and the Persian king, Cyrus, set the Israelites free to go back to Jerusalem. While Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the

Babylonians had separated the powerful members of Israelites society from their land and destroyed their capital of Jerusalem to keep them weak as a people, Cyrus wanted the Israelites to go home and rebuild their city and their Temple so that they would be happier as subjects and so that their land would be productive for the Persians. Zechariah and Haggai were contemporaries and must have known each other well, although neither of them quotes or references the other. Haggai served in Jerusalem in the post-exilic period. He may have been old enough to have experienced the Babylonian invasion and was carried away as a captive, or he might have been born in Babylon. Zechariah was most likely born in Babylon. Haggai is practical, providing logistical directions to his people, telling them to source timber from the local hills and convincing them to move from building their homes to rebuilding the Temple. But he does see rebuilding the Temple as a holy task, not just an important construction project. The Book of Haggai covers only about 3.5 months. Zechariah as a book is much longer than Haggai and covers a longer period. And as a Prophet, Zechariah is deeply mystical, connecting the rebuilding of the Temple to the future redemption of his people. Zechariah looks far into the future, with heavy symbolism, visions, and powerful messianic prophecies. He is seen as predicting the birth and ministry of Jesus Christ.

When the exiled members of society returned to Jerusalem after seventy years, they found much of the land in ruins as a result of the Babylonian siege of 587 B.C. Homes and farms were destroyed, and there were recurring raids from neighboring kingdoms, including the Persians. The Persians, though, who had conquered the Babylonians, did allow the Israelites to practice their faith. And although the Israelites were not independent, the Persians appointed a descendant of King David as governor of the area. There was a subtle change in authority in Israel: in the past, Israel had been a theocracy, with the King leading the people in the name of God. But now, political power was no longer associated with religious power, because foreigners – the Persians – held the final word when it came to civil authority. This meant that the rebuilding of the Temple was more emotionally powerful than rebuilding the center of their faith. The new Temple would honor the true ruler of the land, the true king: God.

In the Book of Ezra – and Ezra is not considered a major or a minor prophet, but simply a priest – a 16 to 18 year delay in the construction of the Temple is described. This work stoppage is the result of neighbors, like the Samaritans, opposing the efforts of the Israelite returnees. Also, there are some corrupt Persian administrators who interrupt construction. In Zechariah Chapter 4, the foundation has been laid, but construction has frozen after this. Zechariah has a

vision, the fifth one that is centered around a golden lampstand which presents God's people shining in the moral darkness of the world. There is a continuous supply of oil to this lamp, representing God never letting his people run out of God's grace. The oil comes from two olive trees, one representing the spiritual leader Joshua the high priest, and the other representing Zerubbabel, the governor and descendent of King David. There is no king of Israel anymore. Rebuilding the Temple symbolizes the spiritual renewal of a people as they reclaim their land if not their independence. Zechariah declares the following, meaning that Zerubbabel will rule not by his own human power, but by the power of God. Zechariah says that is how the Temple will be finally built, by God:

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

In Haggai, circa 520 B.C., after the exiles have returned from Babylon, he, too, is helping his people through the rebuilding effort. The First Temple, the Temple built by King Solomon, was destroyed three quarters of a century before.

Here is the beginning of Chapter 1 of Haggai, and I have edited this for brevity:

1 In the second year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai: 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: 4 Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. 6 You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves,

but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.

⁸ Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. ⁹ You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses.

Haggai challenges his people. The new king of Persia, Darius, a successor of Cyrus, is their worldly ruler, whether they like it or not. The people are lazy about rebuilding the Temple. They would rather build their own fancy houses while God's home lies in ruin. God, through Haggai, declares that nothing they have done or will do will be successful, nothing will leave them feeling secure and safe until they rebuild the Temple. Their crops will continue to fail. They will have little clothing, earn almost nothing, and freeze in the winter. Therefore, they must go into the mountains and bring back wood for the Temple. God tells them it is time to complete their renewal and to return to building the Temple.

Later in Zechariah, in Chapter 8, the Prophet has a vision of God blessing the people of Israel for returning to him, and specifically, for rebuilding the Temple:

***8** The word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying: ² Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath. ³ Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. ⁵ And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing*

in its streets. ⁶ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? ⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; ⁸ and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

God is returning to the land with the exiles. He will live in Jerusalem in the Second Temple, in the southern kingdom of Judah. (Remember that the Northern Kingdom was destroyed long ago by the Assyrians and its people were absorbed into the Assyrian population, thus disappearing forever). People will live in Jerusalem in safety to old age. Children will be born. The remnant, consisting of those who had remained in Jerusalem and those who have returned, will be the new Chosen People. The Prophet is using the powerful biblical concept of a “remnant” to remind the people that there has always been, after every failing of the Israelites, a remnant who remained true to God. But, of course, the people must now live with faithfulness to God and in a way that is morally righteous.

The Second Temple survived until 70 A.D., that is, for about 600 years, when the Romans destroyed it, along with much of Jerusalem as retaliation against an uprising. Thus, the the First and the Second Temples each stood for several hundred years. We might remember that in the Gospel of John, Chapter 2, Jesus gets angry at the money changers using the Temple to forcibly sell poor people animals at exorbitant prices so that they can sacrifice them in the Temple.

They are also charging people a hefty fee to trade common Roman and Greek money for Israelite Shekels so that they can offer those Shekels in the Temple:

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

It took around 20 years for the remnant to rebuild the Temple. Centuries later, Herod the Great spent 46 years expanding and renovating the Temple; this was just before the birth of Jesus. Jesus is now saying that if the Temple were to be destroyed, and by that he means his body, Jesus would rebuild the Temple of God, again his body, in three days. We take this to mean that he was predicting his rising after death in three days. As Jesus declares himself a Temple, this reminds us that as Christians, we collectively are a Temple, the home of God.

Our church building in Louisville Colorado looks like the archetypical Methodist church, white, angular, with simple stain glass windows and a bell tower. Over the last 135 years it has served a series of congregations that have worked hard to keep it clean, well maintained, and welcoming. It is a beautiful church inside and out, and we are blessed to have inherited it. But under the

surface are some support structures, in the floor, the ceiling, and the walls that are aging. We are the generation that is going to rebuild, in a sense, not in a visually obvious way, but in an internal, structural fashion. We will renew the structure, make it strong again, and rededicate it as a place where people can come for another 135 years to greet their king, their creator, their God. It will take a few years. This work will not be a new church, but as in the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, we see it as a renewal of our commitment to God, our trust in God, and our belief that God will always be there for us. I hope that any congregation that is currently renewing their church, to keep it standing, to keep it safe and welcoming, feels the same way about their efforts. It is a job we undertake not just for ourselves, and in fact, not really for ourselves at all, but for those to come. We could survive today in a building that has structural issues, but we do not want to hand off to the next generation a building that is not intact.

The community around our church underwent a recent, dramatic rebuilding. In 2021, the Marshall fire burned about 1,200 homes. About half of them were in Louisville, the home of our church. There are people in this congregation who had to move or rebuild. The total loss of buildings and other assets is estimated to be around 2 billion dollars. In extremely rough terms, in today's money, this is in the ballpark of what each of the two great Temples in

Jerusalem cost to build. The Marshall fire was apparently set off by a small fire which began at the base of the foothills and was blown east by powerful winds. Over a period of hours, the fire moved away from the mountains several miles. This is despite fire crews arriving near the start of the fire within four minutes of the first reports coming in. The so-called Front Range of the Rockies, the western side of the Rocky Mountains, is famous for extremely intense winds that blow down out of the foothills and across the plain. The night of the fire, the wind blew hard enough to knock down massive evergreens and fences with four-foot centers, and blow trucks off roadways. Firefighters couldn't chase the fire quickly enough to keep up with it. But responders did evacuate large areas in Marshall, Superior, and Louisville. Apparently, only two people were killed, and indeed, first responders clearly saved many lives while risking their own.

If it were not for dutiful past stewards of our church in Louisville Colorado, we wouldn't have the assets to renovate at this time. Like us renovating our church, rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem represented a major renewal effort for the Israelites. They were reinvigorating their faith, their trust in their God, and their spiritual identity. The Temple was far more than a simple physical entity. And importantly, renewal can be purely spiritual and not involve any buildings at all. We should often seek to renew our relationship with God, who gives us the

inspiration to renew, the energy to do so, and guidance as we proceed. In the fifth chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages all followers of Christ to live with hope. He writes:

5 For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

The things we build are no more than a cloth tents; what God builds lasts forever.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that the house of God is not a physical building:

For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Our focus is on continuous renewal of our faith, renewing the Temple that is us.

It is within us that God lives, not in a grand Temple, not in a simple white church.

Let's finish with two powerful quotes from Zechariah and Haggai. In each step of renewal, the Temple, the true house of God, consists of the collective believers. This is what God promises as we rebuild our own Temples:

Zechariah 1:16–17, NRSV.

¹⁶ Therefore, thus says the LORD, I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion; my house shall be built in it, says the LORD of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. ¹⁷ Proclaim further: Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.

Haggai 2:9, NRSV.

⁹ The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.