

Kingdom Priority

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristchurchEastBay.org. Good morning. My name is Lindsay Ng and I am a youth at Christchurch. Today's reading is a reading from the prophet Haggai. It came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.

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 he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

[1 : 24] Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You look for much and behold, it came to little.

And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why, declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce.

And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills on the grain, the new wine, the oil on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast and in all their labors. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

Good morning. My name is Andrew and I'm one of the pastors here and I'm looking forward to sharing God's word with you this morning. Will you join me in prayer? Father, we want to hear from you today.

And I just pray as your mouthpiece that you would make much of my little, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart would be pleasing to you and be good for your people.

[2 : 40] You are our Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. We want to hear from you. We want to hear from you. We want to hear from you. Fill our hearts with love toward you and awe at who you are and a desire to follow you even when it's hard.

Give us your spirit to do that, we pray. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus. Amen. So like Jonathan had mentioned, like Eric had mentioned, today is the first Sunday of Advent.

We're beginning the Christian liturgical year. And Advent, it means coming, right? So this is a season where we anticipate and we prepare for the coming of the Messiah King.

Just as the people of God in ancient Israel waited for the coming Messiah, so the people of God today, we await the return, the second coming of the Messiah. This is a season of longing and hope.

And can I just say that it's so important, it's so important to hold these two things together, longing and hope. Longing and hope. Because longing without hope is just despair.

[3 : 41] And hope without longing, it's really devalued. Hope without longing is devalued. Now as we enter into Advent today with the words of the prophet Haggai to these returning citizens in Israel, that's what's going on here, they're returning from exile, I think we get a picture in this story of what happens when we long, yet without hope.

And I think we're going to see that when we long without hope, we'll always end up attaching ourselves to lesser hopes that will eventually let us down.

And the constant letdowns only lead us into a downward spiral that increases our longing and our disappointment and our despair even more. And not only that, but the downward spiral will also just

only turn our attention inward, make us inward focus on ourselves in an individualistic, defensive, and self-preserving posture.

That's what it does when we long without hope. That's what it does. It's no good for anyone. It's no good for ourselves. Longing without hope preoccupies us with our own houses and our own fields and our own lands and our own security.

But the good news of Advent, the good news of the gospel is that there is hope. There is a king. He has come and he's coming again. And he's building for us an imperishable house, an imperishable kingdom because he wants to dwell with us forever.

[5 : 10] The good news of Advent is that when we sing, O come, O come, Emmanuel, which means, O come, O come, God with us, he answers us and says, I am.

The God and king of the universe, when we say, O come, O come, Emmanuel, he says, I am coming. I am coming to be with you. And in fact, I'm building a house.

I'm building a house to be with you forever. And that's the point of our text this morning as we enter into the Advent season through the prophet Haggai. God was saying to his groaning people, Israel, back then, and he's saying to us groaning new covenant people, today, I hear your groaning.

I know your longings, but your greatest need isn't your own house. Your greatest need is my house. And you're invited. What you need most, what is of the utmost importance is not your own house, but my house.

Or as Haggai calls it in verse two, the house of the Lord. The house of the Lord. Now, before we dive into the context of Haggai chapter two, I want us to understand the significance of the house of the Lord.

[6 : 22] We need a wide-angle view from Scripture of what the house of the Lord is. And to put it simply, it's so much more than a building, right? To put it simply, the house of the Lord is another way of talking about the temple in Jerusalem.

And man, there's so much I'd like to say about the temple, but let me just say this. The key point of the temple, the house of the Lord, is the presence of God. The presence of God. The meeting place between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

And this has always been God's heart from the very beginning. From the very beginning of creation. In the book of Genesis, we see that God has always sought to build a house, a dwelling place, to be with His people.

Like while every other ancient Near Eastern religion placed images of their gods in their temples, God, He created Adam and Eve in His own image.

And He placed them in the garden. And He made them priests in that garden. He gave them the same job that He gave the priests of Israel. He said, guard it, cultivate it, protect it, nurture it.

[7 : 26] That's exactly what He said to the priests of the tabernacle and the temple as well. And most importantly, there in the garden, God walked with us. God walked with His people.

He met with them. He walked with them and they enjoyed each other's presence. And this is how it begins and this is also how it ends. At the end of the Bible, in Revelation chapter 21, Revelation chapter 21, it talks about the city and the temple and the final dwelling place of God and His people. And it says this, I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and He will dwell with them.

They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

And then He says, I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. So see, this has always been God's intention.

[8 : 35] Even in spite of Adam and Eve's sinful rebellion, their failure as priests to guard that garden and their open rebellion against God in His original dwelling place, God chose mercy.

God chose grace time and time again and He never abandoned His plan to dwell with His people, to be with His people. That is the heart of God, to be present with us, God with us.

And He made covenants to ensure that this would happen, covenants with sinful people, sinful Abraham, sinful Israel, dwelling among them in their mobile tabernacle, right? After delivering them from Egypt even while they complained and whined and groaned and grumbled, He still dwelt with them in that moving tabernacle.

And then, dwelling with them for an even longer time, He dwelt with them in Jerusalem, in Solomon's temple, even while the nation of Israel continued with their injustice and their infidelity. I'm glad it's done. God's a God who wants to dwell with us.

[9 : 48] He wanted to dwell with the people with Adam and Eve in the garden. He wanted to dwell with His rescued Israelites out of Egypt in the tabernacle. He wanted to dwell with His sinful, unjust, wayward, idolatrous people in Solomon's temple.

And even though He would eventually send the Babylonians and come and they would destroy Jerusalem, they would destroy the temple, and He would allow that first temple to be destroyed, even then, He never gave up on His covenant with them.

He never gave up on His promise that He would be with them. And He brings them back, right? He brings them back after 70 years from Babylonian exile just as He promised. And then you have a small remnant of about 50,000 Israelites who've chosen to return and rebuild and resettle in their homeland.

And they begin to farm. And they begin to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem again. And most importantly, they begin working on the second temple. And they laid down its foundation as one of the first things they did after they got back from exile, all because God's plan has always been to dwell with His people.

And this brings us to where we are here today in the book of Haggai, to our text today, these words from the prophet. Here at the time of Haggai's prophetic words, about 16 years, okay? 16 years have gone by since those original 50,000 have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem.

[11 : 10] But after these 16 years, it's still just the foundation. No one has built on top of it yet. And so this is the context that the prophet Haggai is speaking into.

This is what he wants to, this is the reason why he's giving God's word to them, okay? There's nothing done yet. And he says in verse 2 to the leaders of Israel, to the priest Joshua, to the governors of Rebutal, he says this, Thus says the Lord of hosts, These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

Is it a time for you, yourselves, to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?

Saying, you built your houses, how come you haven't built mine?

And, you know, I think we might read this and there might be a tendency to treat these Israelites harshly. Why don't you just obey God? Why don't you put first things first?

But let's be sympathetic, all right? Let's be sympathetic and kind of think of some reasons why they might have left the temple in ruins. For starters, they were returning from exile. Did they have tons of money?

[12 : 18] Probably not. Did they have tons of resources? Probably not. Were they expert, you know, civil engineers and architects? Probably not. And we also have to imagine how daunting a task this would have been for them to return to a nation still bearing the scars of that complete destruction of their beloved city.

Huge piles of rubble to get out of the way before you can even start building, right? Probably not a lot of building materials, easily accessible. And then the land itself and their ancestral homes in disarray and disrepair.

The land had probably lain fallow for a very long time. There were people who were left in Israel too, people usually from the lower classes, and now these people had moved into a lot of these lands so there were legal disputes about who belonged to or what land belonged to whom, not knowing if, you know, this land is mine or this land is yours.

How are we going to settle this? The king of Persia, is he going to settle this for us? And if you read back in the biblical accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah, you'd also know that there was foreign opposition to the rebuilding of the city and to the rebuilding of the temple.

And all the builders actually at one point had to hold both a shovel and a sword at the same time because they were always under threat as they were trying to work on the city of God.

[13 : 38] Verse 8, God tells them, go up that hill and get that wood, bring it down. Who wants to go up a hill and carry wood down, right? It's a lot of work. It's going out of my way. And then there's also the demotivation factor, right?

Imagine how hard it would have been to believe that God actually still wanted to dwell with them at all after 70 years of exile. Imagine how hard it would have been to believe that the second temple, whose foundation, it really paled in comparison to the first, was going to actually be significant in the

plan of God.

This temple that still was under foreign occupation, it was much smaller, much less spectacular than the previous one. How could this second temple that we've just scrounged up, how can this have any significance like the prophets had foretold?

In Ezra chapter 3, there's this really vivid and awkward and uninspiring description of the temple's foundation. It says this, And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads who had seen the former temple wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid.

[14:51] While many others shouted for joy, no one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping. Not exactly an inspiring time to build the temple, right?

And then lastly, you just have the scarcity and the drought and the famine that they're dealing with in the land. I think it's in verse 8, which they don't even realize, but it was God himself who was preventing them from prospering because they let his house stay in ruins.

Verse 9, it says, You looked for much and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins.

While each of you busies himself with his own house, therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast and on all their labors.

They were occupied with their own houses instead of God's and unwittingly they were digging even deeper holes for themselves. So I ask you again, can you imagine being very motivated to build this second temple?

[16:01] Can you imagine going through a drought and famine and such scarcity and having the faith to stop working on your own household and start working on God's? Can you imagine why they might have said, it's just not the time right now in verse 2.

It's just not the time to build the house of the Lord. And maybe that's how a lot of us feel with regard to how much we are wanting to invest in the house of the Lord.

It's just not the right time for me. It's not the right season. But I think the question for us this morning from God's word is when is the right time? When is the right time? I was really convicted the other week.

I'll tell you two stories. There was a time in seminary, I remember, and I was trying super hard to get good grades. I really wanted to get into a Ph.D. program, but my school in Philadelphia, Westminster Seminary, has a reputation for being quite academically rigorous.

Like, I think if you got a 95%, it was an A-. It was crazy. I was trying so hard to get a good GPA, get my Ph.D. so I could serve God and fulfill all the plans that I had to serve Him.

[17:09] And, you know, I worked hard. I worked my tail off and I remember there was one point in the semester, oh, probably several points, but there was one time I remember, not only did Westminster encourage us to study hard, but also encourage us to develop spiritually and they had chapel regularly, they had times of meeting with our prayer groups and I remember one time I was hanging out with my friend in one of these public areas and he said, yo, are you going to go to prayer group now?

And I said, no, man, I don't got time to pray. I don't got time to pray. And of course, the vice, or the associate dean was there in the same room overhearing my conversation and she said, hey, man, you don't have time not to pray.

And she got me. She got me. I didn't value the presence of God and I didn't see my time as worthy of giving to just be with him in prayer.

Another story I wanted to tell you is I was taking a walk in Alameda the other week with Peter Claussen, one of our deacons, and I was just sharing with him some of the things I'm working on in my life. Right now, me and our family, we're really trying to work on observing the Sabbath in a more faithful and structured and intentional way.

And I said, here's my plan, but I'm going to start ramping up after this milestone in our life. And Peter looked at me and he's like, oh, you're my pastor, but can I give you some advice?

[18:42] And he said, don't wait, man. Waiting for that right time to do what's right is not the way of the people of God.

It's not the way of the people of God. God's word to us today is that it's always the right time. It's always the right time to build the Lord's house above and beyond our own houses.

It's always the right time to build God's house above and beyond our own houses. And you might be asking, okay, what does that even mean? What does it even mean to build the house of the Lord? Does it mean like, you know, yesterday when everyone came and they put up these nice decorations, thank you everyone for doing that?

Well, yeah, sort of, but it's also a lot more than that as well. And I'm not saying we all need to, you know, become contractors and go build churches, but Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 that the people of God, the body of Christ, we are the temple of God and the Holy Spirit dwells within us.

So when I ask, in what ways are we building the house of the Lord? I'm asking, in what ways are we building up the body of Christ with our time and with our talent and with our treasure? And I'm not just saying a simple volunteer more, give money more, you know, here at Christ Church we like to say it's awesome if you could worship plus two, right?

[20 : 02] Come to worship, maybe get involved in a community group and maybe serve on some kind of team here, but it's so much more than that. What I really want to challenge us today is to consider our priorities.

I want to challenge our very priorities, like what if the church, what if the body of Christ came before our jobs? And I'm not saying quit all your jobs and join me and Jonathan to be pastors, but like what if we thought about and weighed the impacts of our actions on the church?

Like when we decide to move away, move homes, take a more demanding job or take that promotion with maybe better pay but hours less conducive to leading people into deeper relationships with Christ and His church through community and for the city?

And I say this with hesitation because the last thing I want is for us to be some kind of cult and the church is big and we are so glad that so many people have come through these doors and left and are now serving at other churches in other contexts.

But what I'm trying to press upon us, what I'm trying to press upon is where does the church, both local and global, the temple of God, where's the people of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit land on each of our priority lists?

[21 : 22] And I know this is a big ask because I know I'm not asking most of you to stop dealing drugs, stop murdering people, stop robbing banks, right? Usually when we neglect to do the most important thing it's not because we're doing something evil, bad, or wrong, but it's almost always because we're so busy doing good things, right?

And necessary things. But God is calling us to put first things first here in Haggai chapter 1. To trust Him with the good and necessary things that we often wrongly put before the ultimate things.

We've got to trust Him. He's the one who closed the heavens and withheld the grain and the oil and the dew from these people of Israel because they did not put first things first.

Will He not also provide all those things richly for us when we follow Him? And I hope I've got some of us thinking now, okay, well how can I be building up the house of the Lord, the temple of God, right?

The church. Hmm. Let me think about it. Let me pray about it. See what doors God opens up. And I'm thankful if you're even taking a step like that in your minds right now. But let me also say, are there not some trivial things that we can be giving up right now?

[22 : 36] We often say, oh, it's not time for me to serve God in this or that way. I need to wait on God and hear from Him so I know exactly how I'm going to serve Him.

Did we put that much thought into our decision to watch Netflix last night? And again, I have to be careful. God is not anti-Netflix or fun or recreation or rest.

But His Word is always challenging us to constantly examine our priorities and not to grow in complacency in our paneled houses.

And can I just start wrapping up by saying this? This is not just a matter of obey. Give more. Obey harder. Try harder. Like we like to say here, I don't want your generosity.

I don't want the generosity of your time, talent, and treasures from you. I want generosity for you. I want you to know the liberating way of being so influenced by the gospel of grace, the abundant grace of God.

[23 : 43] God doesn't want more, more, more from us. Like He's got this checklist of all that we have and He's grading us on how much we're going to give. He just wants us. He just wants us.

People who want to build the house of the Lord, people who want to invest in the temple, they don't do so primarily out of duty but out of conviction. The house of the Lord, the temple of God, the new covenant people of God is where the very presence of God resides.

Like what if we came to church believing that? That this is where the very presence of God dwells. The point of the temple is not to have an institution to give to or serve or support.

Like I said in the beginning, the point of the temple has always been the presence of God with His people. You can ask, does it do anything to us to hear that? That God, the most high creator of the universe, desired not just to be God but to be God with us.

God with us. Emmanuel. Something that my three-year-old daughter has been saying a lot to me lately, one of the nice things, there are tons of other not very nice things, but one of the things that melts my heart every single time is she says, Daddy, can you be with me?

[25 : 00] Daddy, can you get me more milk? Well, she says that every morning. Daddy, can you get me more goldfish? She doesn't say that anymore. But she says quite frequently, Daddy, can you be with me?

She doesn't want me to do something with her or for her. She just wants me to be. She wants all of me just with her. She wants my presence and it just melts my heart every single time because I feel loved, I feel adored, I feel honored.

What if we said that to God? And can we hear him saying that to us? Can I be with you? That's what I want, he says. That's what the temple is about. That's his heart.

God with us. He wants to be with us. John chapter 1, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Verse 14, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, literally tabernacled amongst us. Do we realize what great lengths he's gone to to be with us in Christ?

[26 : 02] God has emptied himself, taking on humanity to be with us and not just to be God with us but to be God crucified by and for us. God with us, crucified in Jesus Christ, God with us.

He's the one who went up that hill. He went up that hill and carried that wood because he wanted to be with us. Tear this temple down, he said in John chapter 2, and I will raise it up in three days.

And he did. And he wants to raise us up too. He wants us to know union with him, presence of God with him. Christ Church, the temple has come in Christ.

And the church is his body whom he purchased with his blood and united himself with and filled with his spirit. that's what this is. In the book of Haggai and in the person of Christ, God is inviting us today.

He's saying, I want to be with you. I want to be with you. I want to dwell with you. I am building a house for us to dwell together forever in. Will you join me? Will you join me?

[27 : 12] Will you pray with me? Lord, if it does not affect us, God, that you, the God of the universe, the I am, desire to be God with us.

That your son says, surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age. If that does not affect us, Lord, would you wreck our stony hearts?

Show us that our deepest, our only need is the presence of God. That's what we need. Help us to prioritize the presence of God, the house of God over our own households, no matter what the cost.

And help us to know what great lengths you went to, what costs you paid to build your house amongst us, to be with us, to be our God. Lord, we pray these things in the name of Jesus.

Amen.