

“More Than a Building”
“The Story”: Chapter 19

Texts: The Books of Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah (selected verses)

Ezra Chapters 1, 3 (selected verses)

1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

2 “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. **3** Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. **4** And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

3 When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem.

10 When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. **11** With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;

his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. **12** 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, while many others shouted for joy. **13** No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

Haggai Chapter 1 (selected verses)

1 In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak,^[a] the high priest:

2 This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.’”

3 Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: **4** “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?”

5 Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **6** You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.”

7 This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. **8** Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD.

13 Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you,” declares the LORD. **14** So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, **15** on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

2 **1** on the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: **2** “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak,^[a] the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, **3** ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? **4** But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. **5** ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

6 “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. **7** I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty. **8** ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD Almighty. **9** ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the LORD Almighty.

Zechariah Chapter 8: 1-6

8 The word of the LORD Almighty came to me.

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.”

³ This is what the LORD says: “I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.”

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. ⁵ The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”

⁶ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?” declares the LORD Almighty.

I want to challenge us today—and to do this, picture the following scenario: Imagine that representatives of the Presbytery of Yukon, with Curt Karns in the lead, join us for worship today. At the end of the service, Curt stands up, and he says the following:

“Dear Friends in Christ at Trinity, we rejoice over your ministry, here in this place, for over 30 years. However, through studies done of your neighborhood and also by the leading of God’s Spirit, we are convinced that you need to tear down this building and put in its place a new one, nearly triple in size. This, we believe, is in keeping with God’s good and gracious will for you.

Please discuss how this is to be achieved. We will assist you with some funds, but we believe you have the means, within yourselves, to do this....”

What do you think?
(Entertain comments....)

Now, maybe this scenario might have ruffled some feathers because it is coming from the Presbytery. If so, consider this modification: This same call comes through your Session—your peers like Spencer, Beverly, Jamie, Keith, Joan and others. Imagine they come to you with this idea instead....

What do you think, now?
(Entertain comments...)

Well, one thing's for certain: I've got you thinking! And I think we are also thinking—wrestling would be the more accurate term—with some important ideas:

What is God's will for us?
How are we to answer God's call to us?

Important questions, for sure! Today, I invite us to be inspired by God's Word to us—plus a story from the past that is hardly outdated....

Let us pray: Grant, Lord God, that my words will be your word to us today, and that the thoughts we form in our minds may also bring you the glory You, alone, are due.

Through Christ, our Lord, we ask this. Amen.

Do I still have your attention?

Well, I hope so—because this is what Haggai and Zechariah desire today. For, today, we are in Chapter 19 of *"The Story"* today, and let's set the scene: While a great and exciting event has occurred—namely, the Jews have returned to Jerusalem following years of captivity in Babylon—things have become stagnated, or—more precisely—there is stagnation in one important area: The building of a new temple in Jerusalem.

We'll remember that the First Temple—or Solomon's Temple—was torn down by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar years before. We'll remember—in a first flush of enthusiasm—that the returning Jews had started to rebuild it, but this reconstruction has come to a standstill. Enter now, Haggai and Zechariah. Two prophets—and two "minor" prophets, according to scholars, because their time on the scene is quite short. It's easy to skip over their books in our Bible, they are so thin. Haggai, for instance is just two chapters in length. But Haggai's voice is an important one—even a vital one—when it comes to the history of Israel—and the same for Zechariah, and here's why: *Both individuals move God's people from a time of rebuilding—to a time of creating....*

Now, what do I mean?

Well, consider this context: For the last several years--that the life of God's people has been centered around re-building--and most of this rebuilding has been very necessary, as well: When the first Jews to return to the city--released as they had been by Cyrus' edict--they found nothing but rubble. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar had raised entire city blocks--*and so, there was a desperate need to rebuild homes--places of business, and this is what had happened, and, again, it was all very necessary*

But, the temple? Well, it is still not completed. And why? Well, one of the reasons is what I've already noted above. But, bow, consider what we read, turning now to page 265 in "*The Story*"--or to Chapter 3, in the Book of Ezra:

"All the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid, " Ezra writes. "But, then, 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. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away." (Ezra 3:12-13)

Here is a highly emotional experience, captured for us. We're told that while there are shouts of joy at the new cornerstone being laid--there is also weeping and wailing!

What are we to make of this?

Memories of the past can be very strong. Perhaps you and I have experienced mixed feelings--a great tug of emotions--when a moment pulls us back in time--as well as pushes us forward--and there's more to the equation: *This mixture of feelings can lead to comparisons being made, and these comparisons--more to the point--can produce grief.* Here is the situation Ezra describes--so vividly for us, today. Back come memories of Israel's glory days, for instance. Comparisons are made with the first Jerusalem Temple at this moment, as well. Things--simply put--are not what they once were. And so, the tears flow. Perhaps there is a desire to avoid further grief--we're not told this, but it is only natural in a case where there is pain and disappointment. Either way, rebuilding of the temple comes to a halt.....

Hold this thought for a moment now, and allow me to introduce you to a remarkable person, named Simean...

Simean was an abbot—or church leader—back in the eleventh century. He lived in the eastern part of England, in an area known as “The Fens.”

“The Fens” remain one of the most windswept, flat--and dreary—regions of Great Britain. And if the wind and persistent cloud cover aren’t enough of a challenge, there is the moist, boggy ground. Marshes dominate “the Fens”—you can’t walk anywhere without getting your feet wet, even sinking down into the ground. Simean lived in a city called Ely, in the midst of “The Fens”.

Now, given my glowing description above, you might think Simean had few neighbors, but you’d be wrong: Centuries before, the Romans had built a fort in Ely (as the Romans always did!), and the city had a bustling grain business thanks to the River Ouse which runs through the city, but, as the eleventh century began the only church in Ely stood in terrible disrepair. And it was this situation that draws us back to the opening scenario for this message: In the year 1083, a delegation from the Church of England came to Simean. They told him it was time to build a new church. “Place the building beside the River Ouse” they told him, “but don’t bother with anything terribly novel---a structure like the old will do just fine...” That’s what they told him. And here is where the scenario gets interesting, friends: Simean was indignant: “Your plans,” he told them, “are not grand enough—glorious enough! I will build here a temple that is without rival in the whole of the British Isles!” This is what he said, and--as you can imagine—there were some exchanges between Simean and the church hierarchy about faith and reality, but—in the end—Simean prevailed. He gained their blessing to proceed with his plans....

Surely a man with the ability to persuade, our dear Simean—and someone—more to the point—who brings us back to Haggai and Zechariah, and in this way: *All three men, friends, believed that the time for rebuilding was past—and a time for creation was required....*

For what is rebuilding? Well, to me, rebuilding is usually about using the same foundations—and often the same stones—to put—to bring--something back to where it was before. Now, to be sure there is much to commend this, but—all the same--this was not the vision driving Simean: To him, the church was more than a building—it is a symbol of the living, holy, presence of God—a source of light and love—a beacon shining out into the world, like a great lighthouse, *and so, he began to sketch out plans for an entirely new church that would dwarf all that had gone before it:* It would be the tallest in England, rising nearly 200 feet above the ground, and it would be visible for over 30 miles, over the marshes of “the Fens”

An impossible feat, most said: The ground in Ely was simply not able to support such a structure—remember that boggy, soggy ground?—and beside, they added, where would the labor and materials come from? There wasn't a stone quarry within 50 miles of Ely, they pointed out. Simean was un-deterred. He must have read Zechariah, don't you think? *“The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty.”* I think so...

Because there is something here—in what we read today—that is so important: A church—a temple—is more than a building: It is also reminder that God is present. But there is still more: It is a reminder that God is the giver of every good and gracious gift. Zechariah, for one, lays it out plainly: *“The silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the Lord.”* Here is recognition of—and a claim upon--our resources, upon all that we have, really: Our time, talents, and yes, our treasure—and the basis for this claim is very simple: *Everything we have—everything we are—comes from the hand of the Lord. He is the source of our gifts and abilities--the author of our success—the One behind the bounty we enjoy, often without a second thought.*

But the prophets are not done here, because Haggai now builds upon this idea as we read, here in Chapter 2. Listen again:

“Give careful thoughts to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it...”

Now, perhaps you thought I would be lifting up another passage dealing with the fittings and furnishings of the temple itself—that I would pull from the very detailed directions given by God—throughout the Hebrew Bible—when it comes to such things, and—to be fair—these direction are a part of what we read here—God wants the best wood to be cut and hewn for this new temple, for instance. But, here, Haggai takes us to into the life of God's people—and into the life of the world community. And what does he describe for us? He describes a world blessed with so much—and, yet still hungering—and searching....

It is a world where there is work—but then wages do not go far enough, and money flows easily out of our hands due to inflation.

It is a world where although there is a rich harvest, but people still lack of food—drink—and people also lack proper clothing....

Is this description—this picture Haggai points—outdated? He is brutally honest, I feel: He describes his world—and our world--and it's a world, friends, for all the material wealth we have on hand--there is nevertheless an emptiness—and an emptiness felt not just physically—but also spiritually. He describes a time where there is a loss of spirit. Of purpose. Even meaning.

Are we living in days like this, as well?

Am I exaggerating things?

To me—at least—it is hard to return—and to re-read—these book of our Bible without drawing some parallels perhaps less with us, here, than with those outside these walls. It is not a happy picture....

But now let me add another picture to the mix, and here I return to Zechariah, reading now in Chapter 8:

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘I am very jealous for Zion—and so I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.

Once again, men and women of ripe age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with a cane in hand because of age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.’”

A picture that surely warms our souls, doesn't it? As I read it, it's as if a ray of sunshine enters in! Do you here the laughter—see the smiles? It's glorious isn't it? And can't you just see the smiles on the faces of the elderly too—as they watch the children, even receive a hug from them? And, of course, there are those games of chess—and bingo--that retirees enjoy playing...

How does this come about?

Well, clearly, it is tied to the presence of God. But don't we have a part to play in this, too? Don't we also have to want this?

As I say, it is hard for me to read—and re-read—these books of our Bible without drawing some parallels into our own time, and when I read these words from Zechariah, in particular, I am reminded that not only do our communities live in

spiritual poverty, I am also reminded that the elderly—and the very young—are not able to enjoy this kind of life—enjoy this kind of respect and safety...

How are things going to change?

*God light must be seen—it must shine out—and it must shine, through us....
God's will must be done—and we must be willing to do it.*

But how will this happen?

Let's go back to Ely.....

The plans were drawn up, and what great plans they were. When completed, the new church Simean envisioned would dominate the skyline--be seen for nearly 30 miles. But the problem remained: How could it be built?

The logistics were daunting, to say the least. But the first monies found their way to Ely, enough to purchase the floor stones for the nave, and Simean set to work getting them to the building site. First, he set to making the River Oise do his bidding: Parts of the river were soon dredged, even re-directed, so that stones could be shipped to Ely—a distance of some 75 miles. But this was not enough: There had to be roads, too, and—with much sweat and toil by a growing workforce--they were widened, strengthened to take the weight of the masonry soon to come. More and more people began to be involved in what was happening—church members and townspeople alike: As the first stones--for the church floor—were pulled through town, they lined the streets, offering to help. Each of the stone weighed nearly two tons each. 4,000 pounds.

And then came the great day—the day of consecration. Imagine, if you will, this scene: A great crowd townspeople—as well as church officials—have arrived, and among the church officials are representatives of York, a nearby English city. York is the site of another great building project. They are building a cathedral there of similar proportions, but—at least—they have solid rock foundations to build upon, and things are going smoothly. They are on hand, wondering if a great disaster is at hand. Indeed, it's safe to say that other people present are holding their breath. Simean—and his work crews—have done wonders to get the great stones here, and maybe this is all God intends for this dream.

Up comes the first wagon, pulled with a great team of many—sweaty--horses, and, slowly, but steadily, the cornerstone stone is maneuvered over the place. The cords are loosed. Down it goes. And it begins to sink. Down it goes, still further—as it does so, so do the spirits of those watching it. And then--then!--it stops sinking. It levels off. It stays put.

A miracle!
Or a fluke?

Down goes the next stone—the same result: A sickening sound as the ground begins to swallow it up—and then, it, too, comes to halt. History repeats itself for the third stone—and so on. Truly, a miracle has happened! The great building project can go forward—and so, it does...

Now, perhaps you are wondering just how this miracle occurred, and let me suggest that there are two reasons for it. The first rests with something unknown to Simeon or anyone present on the day: The presence of a great rock shelf—some fifty feet below the building site, and stretching the length and breadth of the church.

But just as important, I'm sure you'd agree, is the second reason, and the spiritual side of the equation: *The belief, friends, that God would provide—that God would see not just to the materials needed for this project, but also to the success of the same,* and—just in case you are wondering—your bulletin cover features a picture of this success: Here is Ely Cathedral, set in the midst “The Fens”—yes, there is still plenty of water around—and rising over 250 feet above the ground, thanks to a great tower added to the structure in the year 1450....

How was this achieved?

By countless hands—and countless hearts—all eager to create—to make something new—something un-precedented in this part of England....

And their efforts paid off, by the way. As you drive the A-10 motorway up from Cambridge today, you can see what countless pilgrims have seen for over 800 years—this great symbol of God's presence—and the locals have a name for it: They call it “The Great Ship of the North”. It's an image—for me at least—that speaks to the voyage of faith itself—as well as the peace—and the security—that God can provides during this same journey....

And what of your journey, my friends in the faith? Have you not traveled far—and have you not traveled over seas both calm and sunny—and also rough and storm-tossed? You have, as a church family. You have rejoiced at times—and grieved as well. There have been gains—and losses. Times when things have raced ahead—and times when things have stagnated. *But—and true to His promises—your ship has not sunk, for God provides: Look at where you are now!* Wasn't it wonderful last Sunday, to unveil that picture of yourselves—gathered around the Lord's Table—courtesy of Myron Wright, and a gift of your peers on the Session? And what of the Narthex improvements? That back wall, now freshly painted, and with new lights, to boot! Well, look at it today friends: It has been improved still further, thanks, again, to the time—talent--and treasure—of your fellow members

Because you—you, my friends—have the means to create—to make new things—to do things for our Lord. Your time of rebuilding is over, so to speak, and speaking in the broadest terms, you are now at a place, thanks be to God, where you can move beyond simply maintaining what you have, and look to broadening and expanding it!

But where to start?

If you have not already received it, I hope that the USPS will deliver a letter from me—and from your peers on the Session, either tomorrow or the next day. This letter will be your invitation to be a part of the “*Fruitful Congregations*” gatherings, set to begin here, at Trinity, next month.

For a total of five Sundays, we will join in worship, study, and discussion, and the purpose of our time together will be to discern the will of God for your ministry, here in Anchorage, and beyond. The letter will explain this initiative in greater details, but—to my mind, at least—there are few more powerful stories—either in history or in the pages of scripture—than the two stories we have lifted up today, first, this account of Zechariah and Haggai speaking to the Jerusalem of their day, and, secondly, this story of what a church abbot believed—and did—now nearly 1,000 years ago. Because rebuilding is necessary in our lives—there are times when we must make sure—if things have been torn down—that roofs are placed, once more, over our heads—*but if we think only about rebuilding what has been torn down friends, we run the risk of failing to see the new things that can be built—whether in terms of the material or the spiritual—and to trust in God to provide the means to build this new thing.*_____

What will it take to allow our children to play outside more safely—to laugh—to enjoy childhood?

What will it take to see that the elderly better respected—and better cared for?

What will it take to make this Hillside neighborhood—even Anchorage itself—a place where God delights to be—to be a place that God loves—is even jealous for, in the words of the prophet Haggai?

“On Christ the solid rock I stand—all other ground is sinking sand—all other ground is sinking sand...”

I tip my hat to you, dear Nan, for this hymn choice today—and choice you made without knowing about the story of Ely, in particular...

And let me end by saying that “the Fens”—this most flat, windswept—and, yes, dreary—place in England has another name: It is called “The Holy Land of England”.

Surprised? Well, consider the sight of a place like Ely—and also the presence of not just Ely—but of other great cathedrals that were soon built in the same region, houses of God reaching into the sky—the cathedrals of Peterborough, Scarborough, Crowland, Ramsey and Thorney.

All of them became places of pilgrimage—places that drew people by the tens of thousands, and each of these people, let me suggest, eager to experience the presence of God. And when they entered these sacred spaces, well, and as I am sure any of you who have been there will agree—they were transported to a different place—shown a different reality....

Here is what prophet Zechariah predicted, so many years ago: *“In those days, ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”*

Is he right?

Does our world not hunger still, my friends, for food that more than fills bellies?

For water that quents much than thirst?

For clothes that not only cover nakedness but also make one into a new man—and woman?

Watch the mail.

Mark your calendars.

Be a part of the study, discussion, and fellowship soon to begin.

Be ready to offer your God-Given gifts to the work ahead!

And let us all give thanks to the God who has brought us to this place—and to the God who will provide all we need to do the work he asks us to do. To be creative. To do new—even unprecedented things—all for His glory.

Pray with me:

And now, unto You, O Lord, who has called us to be as light shining in the darkness—and unto You who desires that our neighborhoods—our cities—even our nation—to be Your Holy Land, we offer you our praise this day—to you be ascribed all honor glory, this day—and forever more.

Amen!

