**Sermon Text**: Haggai 1:1-2, 7-12

**Occasion**: 4th Sunday of Advent; Jesus’ Genealogy series 7; 24 Dec 2023

**Rebuilding of Zerubbabel**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Zerubbabel governor of Judah is one of the most important figures in the ancestry of Jesus Christ. He is, arguably, the last major figure in Christ’s lineage until you get to Joseph, Jesus’ earthly father, nearly 500 years later. But why is he so important? Well, Zerubbabel is a major figure in rebuilding the nation of Israel and rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem from destruction.

You see, the people of Israel had been rebelling in sin until God finally sent the nation of Babylon to take over the Promised Land. God put most of Israel to death by the sword of foreign invaders while preserving a remnant of believers. It was this remnant that was taken into exile in Babylon, away from God’s Promised Land of Israel. After being in exile for two generations, the Israelites were freed from exile and returned to the land filled with the promises of God. Zerubbabel was one of the leaders of the people, alongside Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Zerubbabel was of the line of kings in Israel and therefore received the governorship of the land by virtue of his birthright. But despite being in authority, Zerubbabel’s situation was not to be envied.

When the Promised Land was conquered, much of Judah was destroyed along with most of the city of Jerusalem and the entirety of the temple. There was a lot of *literal* rebuilding that needed to be done. Yet there was a lot of *spiritual* rebuilding before that. For generations, the people of Israel had been rejecting proper ways to worship God with many people even turning to false gods. The remnant of Israelites in exile also lost a lot of people to paganism so many Israelites stayed behind in the pagan land of Babylon. Only a small number of people from the small remnant of Israel came back to worship God. How were they, a small remnant, to worship without many people or a suitable building? Zerubbabel knew that rebuilding the people of God remained not in rebuilding cities, shoring up houses, or increasing the birthrate. Rebuilding the people of God can only come through worshipping God properly.

The people of God are not created by nice buildings or having young families in worship. The people of God are created by the Holy Spirit. We become God’s people only when the Holy Spirit creates faith in us that we may receive the promises of God. It is the Spirit who makes us born again by water and the word (John 3:5). And it is the Spirit who leads us in faith that we may be renewed and regenerated in salvation (Titus 3:5). And only in the Spirit and truth do we receive the promises of God through worship (John 4:23). You have salvation in the body and blood of Christ here because you have the Holy Spirit at work in you.

Buildings we have may provide a space to gather in worship, but they do not sustain us as God sustains us in His promises. Buildings do not save our souls. Nor does having young families—babies in the congregation—save us. The demographics of a congregation do not save it. The timber and stone of our building and young families are nice things to have at Hope Lutheran Church, but they do not define us as the foundation of our faith. Our faith is founded on a greater cornerstone that does not fade or decay. Christ overflowing with the promises of God sustains us, just as he sustained God’s people of old. Zerubbabel, as leader of the nation, was thinking of buildings and babies for the ongoing growth of the physical nation of Israel; but Zerubbabel as a servant of the Lord knew that the spiritual nature of the Church can only be sustained by the promises of God. Thus, the temple of God was rebuilt, yes, but only because it led to worship of God in Spirit and truth.

And just to let you know: the temple Zerubbabel rebuilt in Jerusalem was not nearly as nice as the first one. The one before had all sorts of gold and ornaments but Zerubbabel’s temple was on a budget. It was not as big as the first one—not as spacious and impressive. It didn’t quite have all the treasures in the first temple, most of which were lost when the first temple was destroyed. If we ever change buildings, we won’t have everything we want either.

But the downsize didn’t matter to the Israelites. When the temple was rebuilt and worship could be held again, the people of God wept for joy (Neh 8:9). People were joyful that their sins were forgiven, that’s what mattered. And they gave sacrifice after sacrifice so that they may continue in the blessings of God (Ezra 6:17). And the people were stronger in their faith with this new temple than with the old temple. They persisted harder, even though there were certainly people who strayed from the faith over the years. But the reason for the strength of faith was the recentring of the people around proper worship of God because it is through God that we are sustained in salvation, not the physical charms of a worship space. What matters is God is present in our worship that we may be saved. And this brings us to Jesus Christ himself.

Similar to Zerubbabel building a new temple of wood and stone to receive life from God in worship, Jesus came into this world to fashion for us a new temple that we may receive life through it. And I’m not talking about a building Christ made with his masterful carpentry skills. Those temples take years to build and are subject to destruction. For example, you will not find Zerubbabel’s temple in Jerusalem today just like you won’t see the temple that temple had to replace. Both were destroyed centuries ago. By contrast, when Christ gives us his temple, he builds something to last eternally. And even though Christ’s temple was destroyed once, it only took him three days to raise it up. Of course, I am talking about the temple of Christ’s body (John 2:19-21).

The temple in Jerusalem was God’s temple because that was where the glory of God dwelt among the people for the forgiveness of their sins. Christ’s body is the new temple of God because in his flesh the fullness of God dwelt bodily (Col 2:9). If you saw Jesus in the flesh, then you have seen your Father who art in heaven (John 14:9). And when you think of the shepherds kneeling before the Christchild, remember they were worshipping God in His new temple. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh and he fashioned for himself a temple to receive our worship out of the flesh of Mother Mary.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son… The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” (Luke 1:31, 35) It is from Mary’s flesh descended from the kings of Israel, like Zerubbabel, that is rebuilt into the flesh of the Godman, Jesus Christ, for our salvation. It is a much finer temple than Zerubbabel could ever hope to build because, whereas Zerubbabel’s temple demanded sacrifices for the forgiveness of our sins, the temple of Christ’s body itself became a sacrifice for our forgiveness.

When Jesus became flesh and templed[[1]](#footnote-1) among us, he contained the fullness of God bodily. So, when his body was wounded at the cross—nails in his hands and feet, a spear in his side—these wounds opened up the way to God for us. They opened up the way to paradise that we might not be divided from God anymore (Heb 10:20). We were no longer removed from God by a veil of flesh. We could put our hands into his nail marks and his wounded side to touch the presence of God given in death for us. And the blood from Christ’s wounds has cleansed us so that not even our sinful flesh divides us from God. The grime of sin has been cleansed from our eyes of flesh that we may clearly see our God face to face (cf. Job 19:26-27). And we seek to see our God in His temple—His temple of flesh that was born on Christmas Day and rebuilt in the resurrection. This temple—the body of Christ—now lives at the centre of all our worship. For from this temple, we receive eternal life when we touch and taste it in the body and blood of the Lord’s Supper.

Perhaps the temple of Christ’s body is not what we expected or hoped for when we think about a place of worship. We typically like our temples—our churches—to have stained glass, high ceilings, and comfortable pews. We also want our church buildings to have tons of volunteers and loads of kids. But Christ’s temple doesn’t promise any of that. He does, on the other hand, give us exactly what we need to be God’s people. He gives us the grace of God which defies sin and death. He gives us forgiveness and love. He gives us the Holy Spirit to make room for the righteousness of God that we may be holy as saints. This is what we find when we come together in worship at the temple of God as Christ’s body.

And just like Zerubbabel could rebuild the physical kingdom of Israel once worship at God’s temple was restored, so can we build up our congregation when we gather around Christ’s body and blood. We don’t need anything sparkly and new to attract attention. The core of what we need is and has always been here: the Spirit of God and the truth of Jesus Christ. As long as we proclaim Christ, teaching and baptizing in his name, then we will make disciples (Matt 28:19-20). We came to faith that way, and though buildings like this help, we always know the real house of faith lies in the body of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

1. Paraphrasing John 1:14’s “the Word became flesh and tabernacled/tented among us” which refers to the precursor of the temple which was the tabernacle as the centre of worship. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)