

“A New Camelot”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

This is the most bizarre passage to try and preach from, because it needs so much explanation. You have the Lord of Hosts saying this and the Lord of Hosts saying that, and there are all of these dates. What do we care about the seventh month, of the 21st week, of the second hour, and all of that other business that goes on in there? It just seems all muddled up and hard to understand, until you parcel it all out - then it makes a lot of sense.

The people of Israel had been in exile. They went to Babylonia, in Babylonian captivity, 66 years before this event. They suffered as they watched themselves get thrown into exile and, a few years later, having the Temple destroyed. They were marched across this terrible desert land to this strange place they knew not, to have an overlord by the name of Nebuchadnezzar, in Babylon.

Then, many years later, they were taken over by someone even further away in Persia by the name of Cyrus. But, even in the darkest times when they thought there was no hope for them, God worked. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon that wanted to take the best and the finest away from Jerusalem, exile them and take them to a strange place and have them start over, Cyrus, as far away as Persia, which is now Iran, said, “Enough. I want you to go home. You never belonged in Babylon. Go home. Start your life over. Rebuild your temple. Worship your God the way you like.”

Now the Bible said God encouraged Cyrus to do this. But even if it was just a really good political act on Cyrus’s part, God had a way of making sure that God’s plan got done.

So now the people of Israel went back from Babylon, marched through that dangerous pass all the way back through the desert, through the mountains regions, and all of the way back to Jerusalem. The problem was that they were gone for 66 years. The only ones who remembered what it was like in Jerusalem were now in their seventies. In that generation, there were very few of those people, especially the ones who could make that incredible trek all the way back, and survive.

Almost no one knew what to do in this strange land, that was the land of their family, and when they got back they found nothing but a wall. Everything else was destroyed at the Temple. They had no homes, they were politically and militarily vulnerable to battle and destruction. What in the world were these people going to do? Also, most of them were raised in a place with a different landscape. If they were farmers, they were raised in urban environments. How do you start over in the midst of that? Yet, that was what God called them to do?

Most of the time, I dare say, we don’t like what God wants us to do, because God is demanding. God’s plan is greater than just making *me* happy, which I’m not pleased about most of the time, and God’s plan requires us to do more - not less.

That is what happened to the people of Israel. Now, for the first 18 years they were back, God let them go about their work. Finally, God got so mad that God called Haggai as a

prophet and said, “Haggai, get these people working on their right priorities.” For 18 years they came back and ignored the Temple. They built their houses and they built their businesses.

Now if I had come back after 66 years and I had never seen this place, and it was a mess, would I pick building the Temple or would I get my family their house built, get a business going? I could rationalize the fact that if I got my house in order and my business in order, then we would be able to survive. We would get a wall built to protect us, militarily. I had this whole thing worked out. The only problem was, without the Temple, I forgot to bring God along. Haggai said, “You can build all of the houses you want, you can set up all of the businesses you want, but if you forget to make God the priority, you are going to be in big trouble.”

It reminded me of a story about this very wealthy guy, he got a brand-new, top-of-the-line Jaguar and flew it in from England. He was so excited. It came in and he picked it up from the dealership. The guy drove it home showed his wife, then he got in the car and was going to go over and show it off to his colleagues.

As he hopped in the car and started to shut the door, a car came along and knocked that door right off - tore it right off the hinges. The guy got out of the car. He was so hopping mad that he threw a tantrum right in the middle of the street. He had brought this car all the way over from England! Luckily, while he was pitching his 3-minute tantrum, the police came to investigate and help him out.

While he was still screaming at the policeman about the person who tore the door off his car, the policeman asked the guy, “What in the world is wrong with your priorities? You are missing your arm from the elbow down to your wrist.” It went off with the door.

The guy says, “WHAT?!?!?” He looked down, saw that he had no arm, and said to the policeman, “Where is my Rolex?”

This man’s priorities were messed up. That was not unlike what was happening in Jerusalem at that time, because God said, “You can build all of the houses you want; you can set up all of the businesses you want; you can build all of the walls to protect yourselves; but if you don’t get your house - your real house, God’s house - in order, you will be in trouble.

Now you need to remember, in Israel the people at that time believed that God was in a place. As Christians, we believe God is all around us; God is within us; God is everywhere. But going back to the people of Israel, God’s presence was not just in the Temple - it wasn’t even in the outer area. It was in the Holy of Holies, in this one place where the High Priest would go once a year and be in the presence of God, representing all of the people of God.

So, if there was not a Temple, how could God be in their midst? They needed to build the Temple first because, if God was in the middle of their life, then the houses they built would be secure. The businesses they built would be blessed and they wouldn’t need a wall because, if God was in the middle of them and they are being faithful, they would

not be attacked, according to Haggai. Invite God into the center of your life, people of Israel, by building that Temple, and you won't have to worry again.

Now, most of the time in the Old Testament, especially, the people didn't listen, and then they got thrown out again. This is one of those really great, moment-in-time experiences where the people of Israel actually listened. It took 18 years. All they had built was that little foundation - nothing else. They had gold and silver and everything else that they brought back from Babylon - that Cyrus gave them permission for - and it sat in a storage locker.

Once they decided to put aside their homes and their businesses and make God first, they built the entire Temple in less than 15 years. They were not attacked. They prospered. They succeeded. They went from not knowing this strange land of their forefathers and mothers, and they succeeded and thrived.

I believe that Haggai, and he was only a prophet for three months! That was the only time. Jeremiah, that poor guy, went on for his entire life from the time he was very young until he died; Haggai three months.

That is why they went into such detail about the 27th day; to let us know that when we listen to God, we don't need to have that harping prophet up there, if we just listen and respond and in the same way, folks, if we just listen to what he is asking from us - when we do the will of God, all things work for the good.

I heard one commentator talk about it as a "Camelot" experience, when they came back from Babylon to Jerusalem. They were *so* intimidated by the stories of how grand the Temple was. They looked at each other - with no experience, and no background - they thought, we cannot do this at all, so we might as well give up and build our houses. We can be so intimidated by the glories of the past that we don't think we are competent in the present and the future is always going to be bad. Malarkey. The same God who was in the past is the same Holy Spirit that blesses us in the present, and can do wonderful things in the future.

We Christian churches have the same problem. All the churches I grew up in, as a child or a young man, are declining and almost dead. The church in St Cloud, Minnesota, where I was baptized and confirmed, is a shell of itself. The church that I was in and went to through high school, was a church of over 900 members the last time I was there, maybe 4 years ago - there were less than 70 parishioners in the church; just a couple of hundred on the rolls and they were padded then. So many people lived in the past that they didn't realize that those sitting in the pews at that moment are the future.

We do that here. We can say, "Remember when we had 3000 and now we are down to 1100+ members?" But that isn't what it is about. It's about the same Spirit that was here then and is inscribing in our hearts now. It's the same Spirit that can allow us to do great things. It's not about the numbers. It's about the ministry that takes place. It's about the blessings God gives us. When you look at these new members, they are alive in their faith and it's exciting to see.

We were downstairs approving them (it was a close vote but don't worry they passed [laughter]), one of the neat things I saw was when Lynn Bowman, our chair of outreach, leaned over to Fred and Kayla and said, "I remember you guys, you have been doing Backpack Buddies with us."

That is the kind of commitment, that on-going relationship, as new people come into Westminster. We don't just welcome them like a membership tag and put a pin on them. We give them a ministry and a place. You are the leadership that moves us into the future the same way the people in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were the leadership that allowed this church to grow again.

We live or die based on the power of the Holy Spirit. It's you and me being prayer-filled enough, being committed enough in our outreach, and being loyal and faithful enough in our worship, in our music and all other areas, like education. When we do our work faithfully, we will grow - not just in numbers but in the things that really matter. We need to bring Christ into the world that needs to hear the message so much.

Take that call from Haggai, put it upon your hearts. Make Christ first, if that is in your giving, make it the first bill you pay - even before the MidAmerica bill. Put the church "bill" first. When you are deciding whether or not to go to a church outreach event or to a movie that night, pray about it first. Sometimes it's alright - you need the movie. Maybe you haven't seen your husband or wife for a while, so you may need to go do that. But a lot of the time you may be guided in another direction. Put Christ first in your decision making, and in your care, and watch how God blesses and multiplies what we do here, in Christ's name.

Amen