

Places of worship are a problem. And the problem does not seem to be architectural. Grand Gothic cathedrals that dominate a city don't ensure that the worship of God dominates that city. Unpainted, ramshackle, shackles, clapboard sheds perched precariously on the edge of a prairie don't guarantee a congregation of humble saints in denim.

As we look over the centuries of the many and various building projects in God's name-wilderness tabernacle, revival tent, Gothic cathedral, wayside chapel, synagogue, temple, meeting-house, storefront front mission, the catacombs - there doesn't seem to be any connection between the buildings themselves and the belief and behavior of the people who assemble in them.

In noticing this, it is not uncommon for us to be dismissive of the buildings themselves by saying, "A place of worship is not a building; it's people," or "I prefer worshiping God in the great cathedral of the outdoors." These pronouncements are often tagged with the scriptural punch line, "The God who made the universe doesn't live in custom-made shrines," which is supposed to end the discussion. God doesn't live in buildings - period. That's what we often say.

But then there is Haggai to account for. Haggai was dignified with the title "prophet" (therefore we must take him seriously), and, knowing God had sent Haggai, the governor and high priest "paid attention to him. In listening to Haggai, they honored GOD" (Haggai 1:12). His single task, carried out in a three-and-a-half-month mission, was to get God's people to work at rebuilding God's Temple (the same Temple that had been destroyed by God's decree only seventy or so years earlier). Haggai 2:1-5 says,

"The word of GOD came through the prophet Haggai: `... get to work, Zerubbabel!' - GOD is speaking.

"Get to work, Joshua son of Jehozadak - high priest!"

"Get to work, all you people!" - GOD is speaking.

"Yes, get to work! For I am with you.' The God-of-the-Angel-Armies is speaking!'... I'm living and breathing among you right now. Don't be timid. Don't hold back."

Compared with the great prophets who preached repentance and salvation, Haggai's message doesn't sound very "spiritual" But in God's economy it is perhaps unwise to rank our assigned work as either more or less spiritual. We are not angels; we inhabit space. Material - bricks and mortar, boards and nails - keeps us grounded and connected with the ordinary world in which we necessarily live out our extraordinary beliefs. Haggai keeps us in touch with those times in our lives when repairing the building where we worship is an act of obedience every bit as important as praying in that place of worship.

(Eugene H. Peterson. The Invitation: A Simple Guide to the Bible)

READ HAGGAI 1-2

Opening

- As a child, where did you store your allowance? Today, are you a saver or a big spender?
- What great expectations of yours have fallen short?
- In your home, what spreads by itself: cleanliness? Messes? Give an example...

Digging in — Discovering the Word

- Why do you think Haggai chose to speak to both the civil and religious leaders? And why on “the first day” of that particular month, and year (Aug 29 520 BC)?
- After 18 years of starts and stops in rebuilding the temple since returning from exile “this house remains a ruin” (v4), Why is that? To what are the people to “give careful thought: (v5-8)?
- How did the Lord force their consideration of Haggai’s alternative (v9 and following)?
- How did they respond to Haggai’s call in verse 12? Who led their response? How soon did they begin (v. 15)?
- How did God enable this (v12-14)?
- How long have the people been working (1:15; 2:1)? What have the people been doing during the seventh month (see Lev 23:23-43)?
- What feelings does Solomon’s temple evoke (vv. 3-5)? How does God’s command and covenant relate to this?
- God “shaking heavens, earth ... nations” refers to what events (v6-7; see Ex 8 and following; Heb 12:26-27)?
- “The desired of all nations” refers to what? When will this be (v7 and following)?
- Consecration does not rub off, but defilement does (v10,13). What holy work were the people trusting in that would not rub off on their fruitfulness or moral character, much to their chagrin (v14 and following)?
- What thematic ties do you see between 2:15-19 and 1:10-11? Between 2:15-19 and 2:10-14?
- Since crops have only just been planted (v10,19), how can Haggai assure Judah of God’s blessing?
- In this last oracle, what will happen? When? Why?
- What biblical events does this day recall (see Ge 19:25; Ex 15:1,4,19,21; Jdg 7:220)?

Connecting the Dots — Applying the Word

- When have you been part of a communal building project: Church? Village? Barn-raising? What part did you play? How was the community built up at the same time? How did God move during the project?
- How has God spoken to you about your financial priorities and spending habits? Have you seen “famines” or fruitlessness in your personal finances?
- When have you put your wages into “a purse with holes in it”? How did that feel? What will you do about that hole?
- What dream of yours has shattered recently? Do comparisons with past successes help? How might God be building you into a temple of His glory?
- When have you been tempted to trust in a holy work, as did Judah?
- What does Haggai say here about God’s power over world governments?
- What part of your spiritual life has God begun to rebuild? How long will this rebuilding take place?
- As the son of David and of Zerubbabel (see Mt 1:1,12), how is Christ “like God’s signet ring” (v23)? As a follower of Jesus, how are you also like God’s signet ring?

(adapted from the Serendipity Bible and The Invitation by Eugene Peterson)