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Haggai 1:1–15, ESV, abbreviated.

1 In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet: 2 “Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.” 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. 6 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.

7 “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. 8 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. 9 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. 10 Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. 11 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.”

12 Then the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. 13 Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD’s message, “I am with you, declares the LORD.” 14 And the LORD stirred up the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, 15 on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

A bag with holes.

There was recently a massive fire in Boulder County. At the moment I am writing this, it’s not known yet how the fire started, but early reports of power lines being

blown down and starting the fire are now being discounted. Apparently, the wires that were noticed by fire-fighting crews near the start of the fire were in truth telecommunication wires. Focus has recently turned to the possibility of the fire being started by people – a fire that, if true, should never have been lit on a day with one hundred mile an hour winds. The net effect is that a small fire which began at the base of the foothills was blown by extremely powerful winds; and over a period of hours, the fire moved eastward several miles, ultimately destroying about a thousand structures, most of them homes. This is despite the fact that Boulder fire crews arrived near the start of the fire within four minutes of the first reports coming in. The wind blew hard enough to knock down massive evergreens and fences with four-foot centers, and blow trucks off roadways. Firefighters couldn't chase the fire quickly enough to keep up with it. All first responders could do was evacuate large areas in Marshall, Superior, and Louisville. Apparently, only two people were killed, and indeed, first responders clearly saved many lives while risking their own. If there is one positive thing that might come of this disaster, it's that society might again show police the respect they deserve.

Now, it's time to rebuild. This will take time. Labor shortages, the lack of available raw materials, and time-consuming processes for getting permits will result in a several-year process. Some folks have lost all their personal belongings;

others have lost their jobs; many people will be commuting long distances due to the lack of local housing. I pray that no children have been significantly traumatized. People will dig in and begin the long process of getting back to where they were moments before the fire. People will prove resilient.

The Book of Haggai is very brief and contains only one major narrative element. The year is approximately 520 B.C. Leading Israelite citizens have been exiled to Babylon, after the massive Babylonian army conquered Israel and burned down the stunning Temple of Solomon. Today, in the United States, we are not into massive public works. But in ancient times, the only way to get something truly great built was by all of society becoming involved. The Roman Empire, along with many of its neighbors, built impressive structures, some of which still exist today: aqueducts, temples, palaces, public baths, and great harbors. The Israelites, during the time of Solomon, had built what we now call the First Temple. It stood for approximately 410 years. It's difficult for us to fully appreciate the massive efforts that were involved in building these ancient structures. They were the works of entire peoples, not of well-funded, modest-sized corporations. For us, buildings used for business purposes only incidentally become famous if they happen to be impressive for their sheer size; for ancient peoples, famous buildings were by design constructed to be permanent monuments. The First Temple was the single

most significant public work of the Israelites; no other structure that they had built had even a fraction of the same emotional value to the People of God. Most importantly, that Temple was built not as a place of commerce, but rather as an offering to God. The purpose of the Book of Haggai is to record Haggai's challenge to the Chosen People – a challenge spoken by Haggai but uttered by God – to pause in the redevelopment of personal houses so they could focus on the House of God.

When the exiled members of society returned to Jerusalem after seventy years, they found much of the land in ruins; it was damage still remaining from the Babylonian siege of 587 B.C. Homes and farms were destroyed, and there were recurring raids from neighboring kingdoms, including the Persians. The Persians, though, who had conquered the Babylonians, did allow the Israelites to practice their faith. And although the Israelites were not independent, the Persians appointed a descendant of King David as governor of the area. There was a subtle change in authority in Israel: in the past, Israel had been a theocracy, with the King leading the people in the name of God. But now, political power was no longer associated with religious power, because foreigners – the Persians – held the final word when it came to civil authority. This is why it's so important that we consider carefully the context in which Haggai issued his proclamation. The civil leaders did not speak for God, but he did. Haggai said: *"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?"

Haggai, continuing to speak for God, says this: *"⁶You 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."* Haggai is telling the Chosen People that until they rebuild the Temple, they will not have God's blessing, and they should not expect to succeed at their worldly efforts. Israel was at risk of becoming yet another secular empire, rather than a nation dedicated to living by the laws of God. They needed to rebuild the Temple ASAP to ensure that they did not lose their focus as the cornerstone of monotheism in their known world.

Although the Bible does not explicitly say this, Jewish tradition says that Haggai was one of the Israelites who returned to Israel from Babylon; he was almost certainly born there. We see that he steps into a land he does not know. He didn't personally experience the old way in which the citizens of Jerusalem had lived. Haggai could easily have been yet another secular-minded person in the reconstructed Israel. But he was a prophet. He did not speak for himself. He parroted the words of God. He tells the people that God commands this, with respect to the House of God: *"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.” Here is what Haggai says in the name of God: *“Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹ 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.”* There was a drought in a land where people badly needed to rebuild their farms and feed a suddenly expanding population. The people needed to know that there was only one way for the drought to go away: they had to stop working on their own buildings and work on the Temple.

The initial warning about rebuilding the Temple had been given on the first day of the month. Here is what then happens: *¹² Then the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the LORD their God had sent him. ¹³ Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke to the people with the LORD’s message, “I am with you, declares the LORD.” ¹⁴ And the LORD stirred up the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.* We see that the people listen to their prophet. They stop working on their own homes, on their own businesses, and they turn to the Temple. The

Israelites will not become like their neighbors, an empire focused on obtaining riches, expanding its territory, and glorifying individual humans. Rather, they will be the people they were before the Babylonian conquest seventy years before.

The Temple stands as a powerful metaphor. The people have a choice of how they will spend their time, their money, their mental focus, their labor. They make the right decision. They will focus on God, on building the Kingdom of God, not a kingdom of humans. The lesson is obvious for us: Live the way God wants us to live. Don't be tempted by the things of this world. Don't be focused on our own personal needs.

The Second Temple survived until 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed it, along with much of Jerusalem as retaliation against an uprising. Both the first and the second Temple thus stood for several hundred years. Right now, the Dome of the Rock mosque sits on the site where the first two Temples stood. Most Israelis believe that it would be too dangerous to attempt to destroy the mosque and rebuild the Temple, and in fact, only a third of Israelis are said to want to build a Third Temple. But of course, we take the lessons of the Old Testament and interpret them in the context of the New Testament. Our lesson is that we should spend more time focused on building our spiritual lives than on building our monetary lives. The separation between the two isn't clear-cut. We do build

churches in order to come together to share our faith, but there are times when Christians have built magnificent churches more to honor people than to honor God. It's also true that there are things in our Earthly lives that serve as a foundation for our spiritual lives. Working to feed, house, educate, and protect our children is part of honoring our responsibilities in the name of God. What's important is that we don't become so consumed with building Earthly structures and gathering Earthly treasures that we turn our backs on God and forget about our faith. I do believe that one of the main reasons why many people have been leaving the Church in the last two decades is that they are tired of being told that our society is too commercial, too self-indulgent. They don't want limitations on what they can do for themselves without feeling guilty.

I hope that the people who have lost their homes and businesses in Boulder County are able to rebuild quickly. I hope the authorities cut a lot of the red tape that would normally stand in their way. I want to see people living in new homes, with kids and dogs in the yards, and new trees slowly growing back into big ones. The day will certainly come when we will be able to drive through those neighborhoods and not see any evidence of the destruction. But I also hope that our society will realize that it has gone down a dangerous path. It's perfectly fine to build giant commercial buildings, to invest in computing and communications

technology, and to entertain ourselves with the money we earn. The issue is: what is our primary focus? Is it on gaining wealth and advancing our own self-importance? Is our primary focus on living according to the example of Jesus Christ? If every human on Earth lived by that standard, then the world would suddenly become a far safer, happier, more secure home for all of us. But to do this, to truly turn our lives into lives that model the life of Jesus Christ, we need to spend some serious time as a society rebuilding the Temples in our souls. We need to be putting the fruit of our hearts and minds and labor into our relationship with God, not into a bag with holes. Please pray with me.

God, let us rebuild our Temples. Let us each individually make our faith the most important thing in our lives. Let us also, collectively, value each other, protect the weak, and pride ourselves on what we build in the name of God, not what we build in our own names. Let us construct a society that reflects our faith, not our selfishness. Amen.