

It's Been A Long Time Comin'!

Yesterday in anticipation of this morning's worship service (which unfortunately didn't happen) I was thinking of a humorous introduction I might use. This would be in relation to the fact that I was only with our congregation for worship on the first Sunday of February (the 3rd). Worship was canceled on the 10th because of a raging blizzard. I was absent on the 17th as I attended in New Mexico the memorial service for our son's father-in-law. And once again blizzard conditions necessitated the canceling of worship on the 24th. Thus, a month now has passed and I've only been blessed to worship with our congregation once, and that a month ago. Thus, yesterday I envisioned myself introducing myself perhaps thusly: "Good morning, brothers and sisters in Christ. My name is Steven Seng. I am here to lead us in worship. You may remember I have been here previously (after all I am your pastor) and I hope our worship service is blessed from above."

One point of my subtle attempt at the use of humor is to note that being away from one's people and one's regular gathering of God's people can produce a longing that we otherwise can forget or lose touch with. This, of course, was in relation to yesterday's eager anticipation of today's worship. As suggested above of course, blowing and drifting snow necessitated the canceling of worship once again. As a side but related note, if there was any doubt as to the wisdom of canceling worship when the sun is out and the skies are mostly clear, within minutes we got word that school for tomorrow, Monday the 4th, was now canceled. Word got around that the county road crews that were out and laboriously trying to open now drifted roads and that it was noted that in many instances the snow was blowing the roads shut not far behind the equipment. As I noted in a FB post, it is ironic that it is such a beautiful day and yet conditions preclude worship. All this leads to the center of this morning's devotion.

Sometimes it takes time away to help us realize what may be lost. Thus, I couldn't help but think of the Israelites who had suffered some 49 years or so in exile in Babylon. Not only was this a long time span in one sense but also a long distance from their beloved homeland, Palestine, but even more from their beloved city Jerusalem and their beloved Temple. Oh, to go home at last! Hallelujah! It had been so long, so terribly and painfully long! The void was matched by or represented in the intense longing in the heart of every surviving Israelite. God's response was to commission to prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to rebuild the temple upon the people's return to Jerusalem.

"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 Jehozadak, the high priest: This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, `The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" (Haggai 1:1-2, NIV) It is interesting that some people were saying it was not yet time for the temple to be built, but what about worship? The people longed for it. The LORD was not oblivious to the need, nor was that need unmet by God's providential plan.

"Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their

God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, 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, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius." (Haggai 1:12-15, NIV)

Furthermore we are told "On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, '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? But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, 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. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' "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. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. (Haggai 2:1-7, NIV)

One of the interesting things about the church is that in various ways it is built up and torn down, sometimes in a series of oscillating crises and solutions, sometimes both simultaneously in terms of smaller less noticeable things like those that turn some people away while others are drawn back. The church is always in a state of being made new, in terms of Haggai's work, a rebuilding of what once was. The LORD specifically and intentionally asked the question of who remembered the temple in its former glory. This was to inspire them to not only what once was but what it would again become. The LORD gave them a specific purpose, the ultimate goal of which would be to fill the temple with his glory! It is for Christ's sake and his divine purposes that we are to build and rebuild and rebuild, over and over, not simply what used to be but what even more so can be!

Lest we miss this, there is no small correlation between this and the eternal life to come for those who are true disciples of Jesus and which will far surpass that which has been and presently is in terms of communion with God and fellow travelers.

Since we cannot be gathered together today for holy worship and celebration of Communion, I suggest that it might be profitable to give a prayerful read and consideration of both Haggai and Zechariah. Together they give us a sense of the reality the Israelites lived through during those many years. The rebuilding project begun approximately 538 B.C., the temple was not completed until sometime between 520 and 515 B.C. 18-23 years is a long building project. For various reasons the Israelites were far more patient in some respects than we are today. Yet their longing is not altogether different than ours. They loved

their temple and time of gathered worship, as I understand it, very similar to our love for our church facility and our time of worship and fellowship.

I eagerly await the next time we are able to gather, assemble, and worship together. It may be for the coming Ash Wednesday worship service at 7 p.m. Or, in light of snow predicted for Tuesday and Wednesday, it may not be until next Sunday, March 10th. Either way, even though it hasn't been nearly as long as it was for the Israelites, nevertheless, "It's been a long time comin'!" At least it seems that way!

From my heart to yours.....