

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2020

Rev. Roger A. Erdman

**Lectionary Readings:** Zechariah 1:1-6; Psalm 51; Romans 2:1-5; Luke 5:27-32

**Sermon Title:** *First Things First*

**Prayer:** *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

**Salutation:** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

**Text:** The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for Ash Wednesday is from our Old Testament Reading: Zechariah, chapter 1.

**Introduction:** Dear friends in Christ, *a building is only as good as it's foundation.* That's what Zechariah says (cf. Zechariah 4:9; 8:9). This evening we begin a sermon series for Lent/Easter on the book of Zechariah. I'm calling this series *Your Kingdom Come*. Why? Zechariah longs for God's kingdom to come.

That's because Jerusalem's temple in ruins. The Babylonians had destroyed it in 587 BC – some seventy years earlier. So, it was natural for the people to say: *"God's kingdom will come when we rebuild the temple!"*

After all, God says: *"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"* (Haggai 1:8). It's time to build!

**I.** We all know the feeling of looking at broken timbers and busted bricks. What has been destroyed and torched in your life? Is it:

- A relationship?
- Your health?
- Your family?
- Your future?
- Your finances?
- Your vocation?

It is true God has called all of us to build something. It might not be *Fox News* worthy or get the attention of *Time Magazine* – but raising children who trust Jesus, being an honest and hard-working employee, running a business with biblical integrity, studying God's Word on a regular basis, being a loving grandparent, keeping the Sabbath Day holy. So, it's time to build!

Not so fast! Why?

Zechariah begins his book. “Return to me, says the LORD of armies, and I will return to you” (Zechariah 1:3). Remember, *a building is only as good as its foundation*. You see, before we build, we need a solid foundation. You know, first things first:

- Homework, then free time.
- Plow the ground, then plant the seeds.
- Save your money, then buy a car.
- Exercise, then eat a pecan pie.
- Talk to your wife, then make vacation plans.
- Lay the foundation, then build.

And if we don’t? We will end up building a tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Remember, the people in building the tower of Babel. They said in summary: “*Let us make a name for ourselves!*” As if to say: **P**eople. **R**ecognize. **I**. **D**id. **E**verything. And if you take the first letter of each word from that statement, what does it spell? **P-R-I-D-E**.

Therefore, if my reputation, my honor, my plans are founded on pride, whatever I build will come crashing down. We see it all the time. *A building is only as good as its foundation*.

A solid foundation has two parts.

**II.** First, “Return to me, says the LORD of armies” (Zechariah 1:3a). Therefore, a return to the land, coupled with a return to the work of the temple, will be in vain unless the people return to the LORD. So, first things first.

Not every slope is slippery, but to rebuild the temple without returning to the LORD is like building a Tower of Babel. Disaster is just around the next corner! You see, rebuilding is rooted in the soil of repentance and faith. The fundamental need of the people was not a rebuilt temple. Rather, it was a renewed heart.

“Repent” isn’t just a suggestion to “*be nicer*” or “*try harder.*” Rather:

- “Repent” is a call to take God with the utmost seriousness.
- “Repent” is a command to confess, come clean and be honest.

Therefore, to repent isn’t a rite of passage. It’s a way of life. Quite often though:

- It’s easy to grow tired of the messy business of dying and rising.
- It’s easy to ignore the call to repent.

You see:

- Too often, we don’t pray for it.
- Too often, we don’t listen for it.
- Too often, we don’t we don’t do it.

It's tempting to avoid the call to repent. But we can't build a life of love, faithfulness and kindness apart from heeding the call to repent. Apart from repenting we end up building the Tower of Babel:

- A great testimony to us.
- A great insult to God.

Listen to Zechariah:

*“Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Repent from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD”* (Zechariah 1:4).

The danger is to be like the ancestors who, in the days of Jeremiah, relied on the temple and ignored the needs of the orphans, widows and sojourners. Here, Zechariah drills down to our fundamental need – not a rebuilt temple but a renewed heart.

The temple needs to be rebuilt – no doubt! But the work on the temple will become a teetering Tower of Babel, unless it is accompanied by spiritual reconstruction. *“So they repented”* (Zechariah 1:6).

And when they do:

- The flame of faith is relit!
- A new day is on the horizon!

Therefore, Zechariah's generation made a clean break with their failed ancestors. How did it happen? Through confession.

**III.** Confession. The word conjures up many images – not all of which are positive. The following come to mind:

- Backroom interrogations.
- Chinese water torture.

What is true confession?

- Confession isn't telling God what He doesn't know.
- Confession isn't complaining about my sorry lot in life.
- Confession isn't blaming and pointing fingers at others.

The Bible gives us many examples of what confession is:

- David confesses: *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me”* (Psalm 51:10).
- The prodigal son confesses: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son”* (Luke 15:18-19).
- The tax collector confesses: *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* (Luke 18:13).

Here's my confession: It's easy for me to fast-forward through confession. Say the words. Say the absolution. Then get on with things. When I realize what I'm doing I realize I'm a hypocrite. A pretender. Two-faced. I've written sermons about people like me – people who only go through the motions, say the right words, but their hearts are galaxies away from God.

So, let's all slow down. Confess our sin. Repent.

*A building is only as good as it's foundation.* Zechariah's foundation has two parts:

- The first part: *“Return to me, says the LORD of armies”* (Zechariah 1:3a).
- The second part: *“and I will return to you”* [the Gospel part] (Zechariah 1:3b).

How does God return to us? Zechariah's last six chapters answer this question – do they ever! In summary, it goes like this:

- Jesus is our King Who comes to us, righteous and humble (9:9).
- The blood of His covenant sets us free (9:11).
- He is the church's Cornerstone, Tent Peg and Battle Bow (10:4).
- Then, in a dramatic twist of fate for the ages, Christ is detested (11:8).
- He is sold for thirty pieces of silver (11:12).
- He is struck so His sheep scatter (13:7).
- And, finally He is pierced (12:10).

You see, at Calvary, God returns to us with steadfast love, cleansing mercy, full and complete pardon for all our sin.

**Conclusion:** Dear friends in Christ, *a building is only as good as it's foundation.* Edward Mote knows. In 1834 he composed the hymn we just sang. The first few words say it all:

*“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. No merit of my own I claim, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground sinking sand.”* (LSB #575)

Now that's a foundation we can build upon – now and forevermore!

In the name of ✠ Jesus, Who forgives all your sins. A blessed Lenten Season to you all. Amen.

***To God alone the Glory!***