



First things first.

Haggai 1:1-12

First Things First

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Haggai 1:1-12

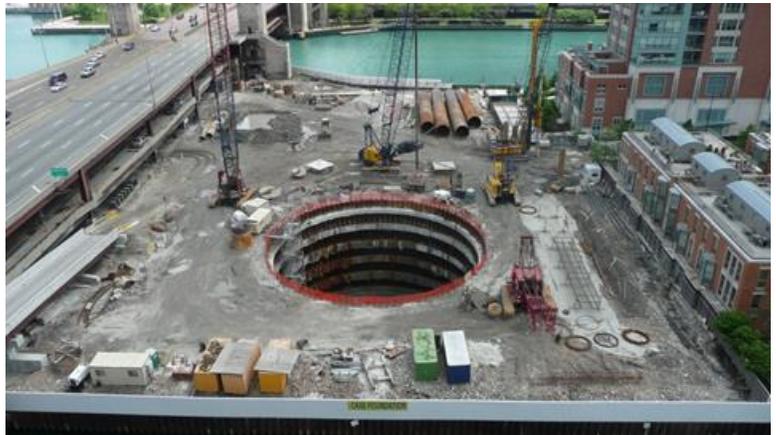
February 8, 2015



The picture on your screen is an artist's depiction of the Chicago skyline. The tower in the middle doesn't actually exist. The so-called Chicago Spire was projected to become the world's second tallest building, consisting of 150 stories and 1200 luxury

condominiums. But construction never got off the ground. After the foundation was dug, the developer ran out of money. Construction halted in 2008 and last year the developer signed over the deed to a creditor. This spire will likely never be built.

The Marble Hill Nuclear Power Plant in Indiana is another example of a half-finished project. Work commenced on this ambitious undertaking in 1977. Seven years later, construction came to a grinding halt. After spending 2.5 billion (that's billion with a capital "B"), the company financing the job ran out of money. The effort was abandoned and now the plant is in the process of being demolished.



Today's lesson concerns a half-finished temple. Pay attention, my friends. It's a lesson in misplaced priorities.

We come today to chapter 19 of *The Story*. For any who are new, *The Story* is an abridged, chronological version of the Bible we are reading together this year.

Let me review where we've been these last few Sundays. The 10 northern tribes have been lost to history. They were deported and assimilated into the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. The remaining two tribes, called Judah, were defeated by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BC and were carried away into exile.

Sixty-seven years later, in 539 BC, the Persians defeat the Babylonians to emerge as the new reigning superpower. King Cyrus of Persia issues a decree that all the Jewish exiles are now free to go home.

These exiles return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the temple. Initially, everyone is all about it. They collect a generous free-will offering to make it happen.

Judah's next door neighbors offer their help. These exiles can see through their neighbors feigned niceness and decline their assistance (Ezra 4). These neighbors show their true colors by hiring trained counselors to discourage these exiles from completing the project. Their psychological warfare works like a charm. After the foundation is laid, work comes to a standstill. For the next 16 years, the project remains idle.



**The time has
not yet come
for the Lord's
temple to
be built.**

Haggai 1.2

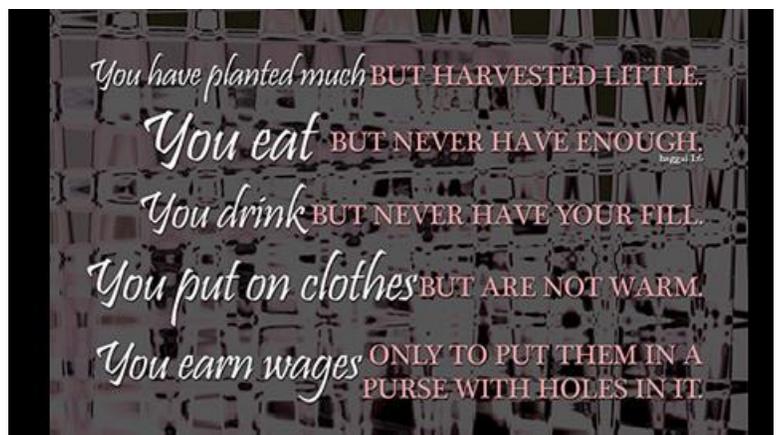
Enter Haggai into the story, a prophet called by God to awaken the people out of their lethargy to resume building. The date is August 29, 520 BC. Haggai is meticulous about providing his readers with an exact date.

Haggai challenges the commonly held view that “the time has not

yet come for the Lord's house to be built” (Haggai 1:2).

It's a convenient excuse, but it doesn't pass muster with God or Haggai. The prophet comes right back with a question: “Is it time for you to be busy with your paneled houses while the temple remains in ruins?” (1:3). It's called “gotcha.” While the people don't have time to build the Lord's house, they sure have plenty of time to invest in their well-furnished homes.

Haggai doesn't wait for an answer. He issues a pointed judgment in verse 6, “You plant, but never harvest. You eat, but never seem to have enough. You drink but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but they don't keep you warm. You earn money, but it only burns a hole in your pocket.” In other words, you are living in a perpetual state of frustration and discontent. Nothing brings you satisfaction, living as you are apart from God. Have you ever entertained the thought that maybe there's a correlation between the sorry state of your society and the unfinished temple?





Go up to the mountain, bring down timber and build the house of the Lord.

Haggai 1.8

This is the point in the story where Haggai issues a call to action. Haggai functions more like a foreman on a construction project than a prophet: “Go up to the mountain, bring down timber and build the house of the Lord” (1:8).

Most prophetic messages in the Bible are met with resistance; virtually every other group who are reproached by the prophets push back. But the people take Haggai’s message to heart. They listen, obey the summons and commence working. Even the governor and high priest pitch in.

Why all this fuss about a temple? The temple symbolizes God’s presence. This transcendent God comes to live among His people in the temple. The temple is where the priests intercede for God’s people. It’s the place where God localizes forgiveness. The temple represents, in material terms, God’s proximity and nearness.

Most world religions emphasize humanity’s ascent to God. They are “bottom-up” religions, meaning that believers’ primary task is to work their way up to God through acts of obedience and religious practice. But Christianity and Judaism are “top-down” religions. Believers don’t ascend to God; God condescends to us. The temple symbolizes God’s nearness. Christians believe God’s ultimate descent is expressed in Jesus Christ, our Immanuel—God with us. Through Jesus, we have unlimited access to God.

So what difference does this passage make in my life? I have three takeaways from this story in Haggai.

The first recommendation from this passage is to **Examine Our Ways**. This emphasis is teased out in the little phrase that repeats through Malachi, “Give careful thought to your ways.” It appears two times in the first chapter and three more times in chapter 2; a total of five times in a span of 38 verses.



Self-examination is critical to the turnaround in our story. The Socratic dictum, “An unexamined life is not worth living,” comes to mind. Ask yourself these questions: Where do I spend my time? Where do I spend my money? What do I think about?



**Stop
making
excuses**

The second recommendation from this passage is to **Stop Making Excuses**. The people don't have time to build the temple. Busyness turns out to be a time-worn excuse. I'm too busy to pray. I'm too busy to read the Bible. I'm too busy to do the

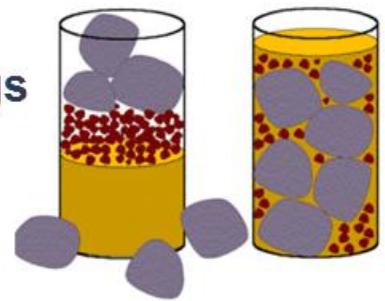
Lord's work. Really! Does God hear any new excuses?

Haggai lays them out in verse 9, “Each of you is busy with his own house.” There's nothing wrong with attending to our paneled houses. The issue is one of perspective. If we are neglecting God's work yet are consumed with our own agenda, then “Houston, we've got a problem.”

We like to play the victim card when it comes to busyness. Other people make demands on us. Other people are responsible for our crowded schedules, as though we have no choice in the matter. Ben Franklin said, “He that is good at making excuses is seldom good for anything else.”

The third recommendation from this passage is to **Put First Things First**. *First Things First* is also the title of a book written by Stephen Covey some years ago. He tells the story of a philosophy professor who began class one day by putting fist-sized rocks into a large glass jar. He asked his students, “Is the jar full?” “Yes,” his students answered. “Really?” he said. He then took a container of pebbles and poured them into the jar. When he shook the jar, the pebbles filled the spaces between the rocks. “Is the jar full?” the professor asked a second time. Some were becoming wise to his ways and said, “Probably not.” “Good,” the professor said and poured a bucket of sand into the jar. The sand filled in the spaces left between the pebbles and the rocks. “Is it full now?” he asked. “No,” they replied in unison. With that the professor reached under his desk for a pitcher of water and poured it into the jar, filling it to the brim.

**Put first things
first**



“So what’s the point?” the professor asked. One student offered a response, “No matter how full your schedule, you can always fit something else into it.” “You fail,” the professor said. “If you don’t put the rocks in first, they’ll never fit.”

The rocks represent the really important things in life. The pebble and the sand are all the little stuff. Put the rocks in first. If you put the little things in first, there’s no place for the essential things.

What are the big rocks in your life? In every funeral I conduct, I talk about the importance of faith, family and friends. I see people climbing the proverbial ladder of success, making money, driving luxury cars, buying their so-called dream homes. It’s all sand and pebbles! God is the most important thing. Make Christ your first priority. Put first things first.

Maybe there was a time in your past when you resolved to do just that—to put God and Christ first in your life. But life happened, there were bills to pay and planes to catch. There were grades to earn and jobs to do.

I’m asking you, pleading with you, to put first things first. Make Christ your first priority. How do you do that? There is any number of ways to make God a priority. Read *The Story*. Join us in praying our daily devotions. Pick out a spiritual growth opportunity in today’s bulletin with other Christians.

Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). What does the phrase “all these things” reference? Given that Jesus has just been teaching about the corrosive effects of worrying about what we wear and eat, “these things” represent all the little stuff in our lives. You know—the pebble and sand. Put the rocks in first!



