

The date was October 17, 520 B.C. The Bible rarely gives us enough information to be so precise, but in this case we can be. And on that October day, the people of Israel were in the middle of harvest, which was always an exciting time because they were gathering in the fruits that God had given, preparing for the year to come, being excited about what they had for the days ahead. But in this particular case, harvest had to wait a bit, because it was also the time of the Feast of Booths. And that was a feast that God had commanded Israel to keep year after year as a way of remembering their time in the wilderness some nine hundred years ago. And during that festival, they were supposed to live in tents. They were supposed to offer up sacrifices, and they didn't have to work for an entire week. So for that reason it was also exciting. And they were all gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. And October the 17th in that particular year was the last day of that feast, and soon they would be going back to work.

But there was a shadow that hung over their celebrations that year, because things were not quite what they used to be. Just sixteen years earlier, Israel had come back from exile far away in the east, because seventy years before that, eighty-six years ago, they had been taken away from their land and forced to live somewhere else. Darius, the Persian king, had sent them back home, but not everybody came home. And so this once prosperous nation, full of people, was now ruled by a foreign king and was far smaller than it used to be. And on top of that, when they came back home, they found the city of Jerusalem in ruins, and the temple had been destroyed. They started the work of rebuilding it at that time, but it soon came to a stop, because the people who lived in the land, their replacements, didn't want them to finish the work. And in fact, they had complained to the king at that time and convinced him to force them to stop. And so work on the temple had ceased for sixteen whole years. Now a month ago, things had started to improve. They had started up work on the temple again, but it was pretty slow going. Because on the one hand, rebuilding a large building is a lot of work in any period in history, but it's really slow when you don't have power tools to do it and when you don't have that many men to carry out the work anyway. And it was the time of harvest, like I said, and harvest interrupted the work. Because all available manpower had to be out in the fields, since everything had to be gathered in by hand. There wasn't enough men to carry on the work. And on top of that, the festivals themselves stopped the work. They had to stop working, to stop building the temple at God's command. And so I'm sure some of them were feeling rather impatient. They wanted to get back to it. They wanted to get the job done.

But perhaps the most disheartening thing of all for them, Christians, was the temple itself. Because there were some in the crowd there old enough to remember the first temple. They had seen it as a child, but they had seen it in all of its beauty and all of its glory. And this temple that they were rebuilding, even though they were doing the best that they could, seemed like a cheap copy, nothing like the first. And on top of that still, four hundred and forty years earlier, to the day, Solomon had dedicated the first temple, and the glory of the Lord had filled it at that time. So all of this together, then, combined to make it all seem hopeless, like the work was never going to get done. And without a temple, how could they truly celebrate, even in the midst of the feast?

But on that October day, as the feast was coming to an end, Haggai the prophet stood up in their midst, and moved by the Holy Spirit, he brought to them a clear word from the Lord. Haggai says in verse 4: "Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts." All of these things around them were threatening to drag them

down. They were threatening to make the work stop again. But the Lord promised to lift them up. Work, he says, because I am with you. You are not alone in this. I will go with you every step of the way. The work that you are doing is not pointless. The work that you are doing is not impossible. Everything that you are doing for me, says the Lord, is good. So lift up your heads. There is hope even in the midst of your gloom!

And more than this, God said that he was about to turn things around. Verse 6 of Haggai 2 says: "For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land." Shaking like this in the Bible is often used as a symbol of God's power, and as a result it's often used as a symbol of his judgment. Isaiah 13, for example, says: "Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger." So God told Israel on that October day that he was about to shake things up. He would send judgment upon the world. But it would not be an ordinary earthquake. Everything would be shaken, the heavens and the earth together, because God was going to turn it all around. God was going to change the fortunes of his people. He was not going to destroy them, but restore them. The nations would be shaken, and they would no longer come against his people in war. No longer would his people be a small nation, a fraction of what they once were. God would lift them up, and the coming glory would be far greater than anything that had come before. So they could work without fear.

But Christians, God is not concerned with a building. A building is just a building. In fact, this very temple, this same building would be destroyed later by the Romans. But God was talking about the glory that would come in a new temple, in something far greater than had ever come before. And this new temple would stand forever. This new temple would never pass away. On the day when God would shake the nations, he would gather all in and not scatter them. All would be united into one people. We see this clearly in verse 7 of our reading. And I know that our reading says that the "treasures of all nations shall come in." That's a fine translation. There's nothing wrong with it. But I think that the old King James Version makes it a little bit more clear when it says: "I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: And I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts." God would shake all nations, and then the desire of all nations would come. All the nations would turn to him, and his glory would be far greater than anything before. Because God would raise up his people by sending them his Son, and in him all would be united, because whoever calls on his name by faith will be saved.

Yes Christians, Jesus is that greater temple. We see this clearly in the Gospel of John when the Jews are asking Jesus how he could possibly rebuild the temple like he said that he would. It took them years to build the temple! How would he be able to do it in three days? But John tells us that he was speaking about the temple of his body. And though that temple was torn down on the cross, Christians, Jesus rebuilt it in three days when he rose again from the grave. And that temple will never pass away. And the glory that comes through him is greater than all that has come before. Because as John says again, John chapter 1: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

So Christians, though we are faced with many things in these dark and latter days, and though these things threaten to overwhelm us, though they threaten to make us lose heart and to weaken our hands for the work of God, the desire of all nations has come. Jesus has been born. God has

brought us peace through his Son who is the Prince of Peace. And knowing this, Christians, why should we worry? Why should we hold back from what God calls us to do? God has given us a reason to keep going, because he has given us Emmanuel, which means God with us. And nothing will ever be able to take us away from him. So let us keep going, Christians. Let us not lose heart in these dark days. Let us strengthen our hands for the work that God has called us to do, because Jesus, the greater temple, has come, and his glory will never pass away.

Let us pray. O come, Desire of nations, bind / In one the hearts of all mankind; / Bid Thou our sad divisions cease, / And be Thyself our King of Peace. Amen.