**Come back!**

Text: Zechariah 1:1-6

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures**: Matthew 7:21-27; Haggai 1:1-15; Zechariah 1:1-6

*Suggested song of response: STTL455 We have not known thee as we ought*

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 1 of 19

**Theme**: Through his appointed prophet Zechariah, the Lord calls his people to return to Him, which they do in repentance, acknowledging God's sovereign justice.

**Fallen Condition Focus (FCF)**: we tend to stray from the Lord and not to learn spiritual lessons from the history of God’s people.

**Proposition**: Our ongoing repentance is essential for building the church.

**Introduction**

We are about to begin a journey through the book of Zechariah. We're going to see vivid images and puzzling visions. In order to understand what is going on we'll need to get a grip on the turbulent times in which the prophet Zechariah lived and spoke for God. As we progress through the text of these Scriptures, we'll see that the great encouragement which the Lord brought to his people over 2500 years ago still speaks to us today.

The first verse of this book contains key data which locates both the time and place in which Zechariah is prophesying. It is the eight month of the second year of Darius. That's October-November 520BC. Darius I was the grandson of Cyrus, the Persian king who had authorised the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. We read about this in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Whereas the Babylonians had the policy of taking captives away from their homeland, Cyrus sought to win the allegiance of the many people groups in his vast kingdom through a policy of tolerance towards their religious and national loyalties. In doing so he sought to bring peace, control and a solid tax base to the vast Persian empire.

Under the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1), as many Israelites as wished could return to their homeland to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. (Remember that in 586BC the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the temple). This rebuild project was partially financed by the Persian royal treasury. 43,360 Israelites returned (Neh 7:66), together with 7,337 servants. Amongst this number were the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the governor of Judah who was a descendant of David.

There would no doubt have been great zeal, excitement, anticipation and joy amongst those who came back to their land after the hard years of captivity in a foreign land. Yet, when they arrived, there were many discouragements. The land was depressingly small, being a province of the Persian Empire, now called Yehud. It was a fraction of the geographical size of the great kingdom of Solomon. There was opposition to the rebuilding of the city wall. You can read about the trouble caused by Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod in the book of Nehemiah (4-6). They were angry against those who had returned to the land and they plotted and schemed to try and halt the work. These were the days of the 'trowel and the sword'. The builders carried materials in one hand and held a weapon in the other. There were constant reminders of the contrast between the glories of the past and the humiliations of the present. The walls were broken down, the land which had once flowed with milk and honey was now a barren wilderness, the temple was destroyed, there was no king descendent from David on the throne.

We can see both from the opening verse which says 'the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah' and from the contents of the book that we are about hear revelation from the LORD, the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Creator of the Universe, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We therefore know that whilst these words spoke very directly and specifically to the particular situation of the returned exiles in Jerusalem, these words are living and active, penetrating our own souls today. As we seek to apply the truth of Scripture through this series we will need firstly to understand what these words of revelation meant to those who first heard them 2500 years ago and then secondly, in the light of the coming of Christ, to learn how they relate to us today.

The name 'Zechariah' means 'The Lord (Yahweh) remembers'. As we will see it is not that the Lord ever forgot his covenant promises to be God to His people, but rather that through the words of his prophet he confirms his faithfulness to His promises, despite the repeated disobedience of His people.

There are at least 27 different 'Zechariahs' named in the Bible. The prophet here is the son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo. In Nehemiah 12:12-21 and Ezra 5:1 he is simply called 'the son of Iddo'. This could be because his father Berekiah died young or that Iddo was a more prominent person in their priestly family.

Some Bible scholars have suggested that there are two different authors to this book because the first 8 chapters of visions and oracles give the 6th cent. BC returned exiles a new way to view their situation, whereas the last 6 chapters have a future focus on the coming Messiah. Yet it is quite understandable that the same writer would use two different styles when dealing with different subjects. There is no reason not to take the first verse of the book as relating to the whole, Zechariah then being the author of all 14 chapters.

**1. The Lord's warning**

Anger, whether God's or man's is always a response. Nobody can ever rightly say “you made me angry”. At times we are provoked to anger by the actions and words of others, but the decision as to how we are to respond is always entirely ours. There are two kinds of angry response: unrighteous/unjust and righteous/just.

A mother shouts at her children in the supermarket and grabs them roughly because they keep taking items off the shelves, but she has never actually taught them how to behave when shopping. This is unrighteous anger.

Jonah became angry because Nineveh, the capital of the enemy nation Assyria, repented and God spared them (Jonah 4:4). He thought God should have been less forgiving. This was unrighteous anger.

How do you feel about the brutality of Boko Haram, ISIS training young children to commit atrocities? 13,000 unborn children murdered in their mother’s wombs here in New Zealand? These evils call for righteous anger.

Nehemiah was very angry when he found out that the wealthy Israelites were exploiting the poor (Neh 5:6): His was righteous anger.

When Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, He was angry when he saw the hardness of heart of the Pharisees (Mark 3:1-5). Our Lord was righteously angry.

Notice that the first words Zechariah speaks express God’s intense righteous anger. This is the dark background against which the Lord’s bright and gracious invitation - to come back to Him - is set.

We read: "The Lord was very angry with your forefathers". In Hebrew the first and last word of this sentence is ‘angry’, not slightly annoyed, mildly displeased, angry but emphatically VERY ANGRY.

Why? Were the ancestors of these returned exiles not God’s chosen people, Israel? Yes, they were. Yet they had consistently and persistently broken the covenant their God had made with them. Years of idolatry, mixing pagan religion with true worship, immoral behaviour, oppression of the poor, alliances with other nations and corrupt leadership had stretched the Lord’s patience until He said “enough”. God expresses his righteous anger against a people who simply would not listen to him through the prophet Jeremiah (7:16): "*So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you*”.

The people had eventually ended up ‘past the point of no return’. Covenant curses were inevitable, the land of Judah was over-run, the city walls broken down, the remaining wealth of the temple plundered, the place of God’s presence amongst his people turned to ruins and the people carried off to exile in Babylon.

This sad history is to serve as a warning, not only to Joshua, Zerubbabel, Haggai and Zechariah and the other 44,000, but to us today also.

The message here should have been loud and clear to them and it should be load and clear to us. God judges sin. Judgement follows sin, but usually not straight away. Why the seeming delay? Because of the character of the Lord, “*slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness*” (Ex 34:6)

God speaks of his deep anger at rebellion and lovingly warns of coming judgement.

We know that warning others to avoid danger demonstrates responsible care:

“Unstable cliff edge –stay behind the barriers”

“For their safety airline passengers must obey the instructions of crew members”

“Smoking cigarettes is likely to cause cancer, strokes and heart disease”

So the Lord warns the people He loves:

**Zechariah 1:4** *Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.' But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD.*

When we are not hearing God’s voice, we are vulnerable to temptation, because the voice of Satan the liar appears more attractive to our fallen hearts. James describes the progression this way: (1:14-15**)** “*but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death*”.

Death is what had come to the forefathers, the ancestors of those to whom Zechariah ministered. Almost all of those who returned with Zerubbabel, Jeshua and Nehemiah would have been under 70 years of age. Therefore, most, if not all, of those who had been carried away as captives would had died in Babylon.

So God reminds the people of their sad covenant history. v5 “*Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever?”*

Time has passed on, the ancestors died in a foreign land, the prophets who brought the word of the Lord, men like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel have also died and yet God’s voice is not silent! The Word of God endures, outliving all previous generations, and comes again to His people. That’s what the Lord says in v6 “*But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?”*

The Word ‘overtook’ (‘nasag’) them. This is a hunting image. Like an arrow shot at an animal moving away travels faster and catches up to make the kill when it strikes the target. It’s a chilling reference which points back to the covenant curses made 900 years before (Deut 28:36). *“The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers.* The Babylonian empire had swept over the people, taking them captive, just as the Lord had said.

God’s word is inescapable. Jesus said: “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*” (Matthew 24:35). You will meet the Lord Jesus Christ one day. At that time: “*At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*”. (Phil 2:10-11)

Have you turned away? Are you moving away from God? The warning then, is the warning now. Listen to the Word of the Lord today, before that Word catches up with you like a fatal arrow wound in the heart of fleeing prey. ***“****Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”.* (Hebrews 4:13)

**2. The Lord's call**

The title of this sermon “Come back!” is taken from key word in our text today which is “turn back/ “return” (Heb: Shub). The Lord is speaking to His people through His servant the prophet Zechariah: v3 “*Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: '****Return*** *to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will* ***return*** *to you,' says the LORD Almighty”.*

The name “LORD Almighty” is literally ‘Jehovah of armies’ and emphasizes the sovereign power of God. The call to return to the Lord is more than a polite invitation, it is like a military command. A call to come.

In a military parade the commanding army officer will direct his troops: Fall in! Eyes Front! Present Arms! About Turn!

“About turn” = means”1800 turn to the right”. Likewise, the word “return” here in our text has the sense of completely changing direction and going in the opposite direction. The instruction here is to do exactly what the forefathers of these people had not done: to listen and pay attention to the voice of the Lord.

Notice that it is God who takes the initiative to call his people “Come back to Me!”. If you seek me, you will find me. Return to me and I will return to you.

The Lord’s call is not first and foremost a call to return to Jerusalem. It is a call to come back to Him! Yes, the return of the exiles was a physical movement of a small remnant of the people, but more importantly, they were being called to return spiritually to their God.

The call to repentance came repeatedly to the people who returned to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 9;2 we read that “*Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers*”. Ezra led the people to confess their sin of marrying outside the covenant community (9:1-10:17). The prophet Haggai, 2 months earlier had called the people to stop serving themselves and to focus on building the Lord’s house.

This then is another call to repentance. It is a call to spiritual renewal. It is a call to a renewed fellowship with the God of the covenant. For the OT Israelites this relationship came through the priests. In the book of Nehemiah, we read of the appointment of Levites as soon as the city wall had been repaired (7:1). For us, this side of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, our relationship with God comes only through Him, the great high priest who has passed through the heavens, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, one who has been tempted as we are, yet with sin.

If God seems far away, it is likely because we have removed ourselves from Him by our sin, our neglect of our Lord, our apathy, our nursing of past distresses and disappointments, injustices and injuries. If God is distant it is likely because we have ceased to trust fully in Christ Jesus, we may have listened to his words, but we have not done them. In which case we’ve tried to build a house on sand.

Two months earlier than the time of our text “*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*”. (Haggai 1:12)

Now through Zechariah another call comes. Ongoing repentance is the foundation upon which the temple was to be built. Likewise, for us, our ongoing repentance is the foundation for the rebuilding of the church when she has suffered because of sin within.

Today, through the power of His Living Word, our Lord is again calling us as a congregation to “Come Back” to Him. The last part of our text shows us the way!

**3. The People Listen**

v6b"*Then they repented and said, 'The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.*'"

The way of repentance for these OT saints was to accept that the Lord had acted justly in His past dealings with them. This was a collective acceptance of God’s judgement both on their recent rebellion, and on their forebears’ unfaithfulness.

Notice that the people then identified themselves with those who had gone before. There was a solidarity with the past. For those of us who were not part of this church until recently, the history of this congregation is now our history.

We know in detail why God's people were carried into captivity, the progressive turning away of God’s people from the One who loves them is painfully documented through the histories and prophets of the Old Testament.

However, we do not know in the same way why some of the trouble in the history of our church have occurred. Yet, can we also say today: "The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve"?

No. He has treated us far more lightly than that! Given the lack of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control which has too often marked the life of congregations like ours and therefore also of each one us….

We must say that the Lord Almighty has **not** done to us what our ways and practices deserve.

With our collective history, we do not deserve to be a church today. With our individual history, we do not deserve to know the Lord today. We do not deserve to be restored to being a spiritually healthy church.

But Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for our covenant-breaking, the intense anger of God has fallen on Him in our place. The Lord Almighty has done to HIM what our ways and practices deserve. At the start of His ministry he echoed God’s call to repentance through the prophet Zechariah: "*The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*" (Mark 1:15)

So at the start of the future which begins today, Christ likewise calls us to ‘repent and believe the good news’. The good news is that our covenant God is gracious, willing to forgive, faithful in love. He encourages us today with His call to return, and to keep returning to Him in repentance and faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Notice that God does not say "first build me a temple and then return to me" but rather "return to me and after that you will be ready to build me a temple". The 6th century BC temple builders needed to learn that if God was to be actively present amongst them, then they first needed to turn to Him. Their ongoing repentance was the foundation for their temple rebuild.

Likewise today, we need to learn that if God is to be actively present amongst us, then we first need to turn to Him. Our ongoing repentance is essential for the building of this church. If we will humble ourselves together before the Lord, repenting and continuing to repent, and return to Him, then He promises to return to us! Then Christ will build His church in our midst and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty. In other words, “Come Back”.

AMEN