

“A Time to Build”

Nehemiah 1:4-11

July 12th, 2020

First in Series on Nehemiah

*“When I heard these words, I sat down and wept,
and mourned for days...”*

- **Nehemiah 1:4**

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, build us up and strengthen us by your grace; fill us with the love of your Holy Spirit that we remember your commands. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Sermon Message

Perhaps you have heard the following words in scripture: “A time to live and a time to die...a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted...a time for war and a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11). The Preacher in Ecclesiastes knows that life is complex, though he understands that there are moments when we simply cannot avoid the inevitable.

Life places before us choices at certain moments: we can build up, or we can rip apart. We can laugh, or we can cry. We have a choice in how we respond.

What is the great line in the movie the *Shawshenk Redemption* where Andy Dufresne tells Red, played by Morgan Freeman, that “You can get busy living, or you can get busy dying”? That is the simple choice. .

It is similar to advice I received when I first entered the ministry. Charles Hutchinson, known by many as “Hutch,” was my first District Superintendent. He walked with Dr. King in Alabama and served as a pastor here in Indiana as well. He was also a member of this church. He spoke often about how he would throw “pity-parties” for himself, but he realized that they were pointless! The attitude to “pout,” as Hutch would say, can run deep! When the problems mount, the temptation to quit can work on us. It can seem counter-intuitive to build up, or to weave together. But that’s the choice!

Introducing Nehemiah

This is one of the reasons we are going to explore Nehemiah: Here is a person who could have thrown a pity-party on more than one occasion, but who went to work instead rebuilding Jerusalem, following the Babylonian Exile. Nehemiah understood that despite all the destruction the time to build had come.

Where most people might have seen a problem, Nehemiah saw an opportunity. After all, the city and the Temple lay in ruins. Ninety years earlier the Babylonians had laid waste to Judah. They had taken the people into exile. It was a time of national humiliation and chaos.

In fact, the prophet Jeremiah had warned the people ninety-years earlier of what would happen if they did not turn (or return) to God (Jeremiah 6:1-9). But no one listened. Now, when Nehemiah comes on the scene, the time had come to return to the land and build up what the nation had lost.

That is what this opening section is about: Nehemiah, once he accepts the mission to rebuild, looks out over a heap of rocks and he weeps over what the people had done (and not done) to get to this point (Nehemiah 1:4). He laments how the whole nation has been unfaithful and disobedient (1:5). He realizes that the building up of the nation is not going to be easy, as it is going to involve not just physical but moral and spiritual renewal: the people are going to need to confess what they had done, and not just pay lip service to God.

It is an importance point. It is important because as we begin this series, I want us to note how Nehemiah begins his work: he begins in prayer, grieving and fasting, confessing, remembering.

It is the reason Nehemiah is on the ruins in the first place: the people had offended God and failed to keep God's commandments (1:6) and Nehemiah, being the leader he is, admits how far he and the people have fallen.

But now comes the hard part: *building*: how to build amidst the rubble; how to do several things all at once, all at the same time, to accomplish the mission.

That is Nehemiah's challenge – and ours as well.

“Houston, We Have a Problem”

How many here, or listening at home, remember both the space flight and the movie Apollo 13? Great movie! Incredible story.

Perhaps you may remember the most famous words ever uttered in the history of space flight. One sentence. Five words. By Captain Jim Lovell. Two thousand miles from earth. Almost to the moon. Fifty-five hours into the mission, a mysterious explosion rocks the lunar module – the air grows thinner, the cockpit darker and colder, and then Jim Lovell saying those famous words: “Houston, we have a problem.”

And while traveling through space toward the moon, astronauts Jim Lovell, John Swigert, and Fred Haise, along with the ground crew in Houston, do everything possible, all at the same time, to return the crew to earth.

How like Apollo 13 to remind us of what life can be! There are times when we are cruising along, watching the stars, gazing at the moon, going to watch our children play soccer, sharing with loved-ones, thanking God for every blessing – when all of sudden: Boom! Explosion! Houston, we have a problem!¹

Consider the following: after twenty-five years of marriage, a spouse files for divorce. A doctor comes into our room and shares with us a report of cancer. A young person deals with an addiction. A family struggles to make ends meet. A city deals with unrest. A nation deals with a pandemic. And all of a sudden the walls of comfort and protection come tumbling down.

And you have a choice to make: you can face the problem, or you can deny the problem exists!

America, we have a problem! Public health crisis. Racial and economic disparities. Lack of trust in our institutions and leaders. So many things all at once.

But here is what I like about Nehemiah, and here is what I think we can learn over the next few weeks: Nehemiah realizes that to solve a problem you have to recognize the problem. That is half the battle! Before we can ever solve a problem, we have to understand it!

¹ Thanks to James Merritt for this insight in “Houston, We Have a Problem” (Nehemiah 1:1-11) at www.esermons.com.

I believe it was poet T.S. Elliot who once wrote that “Humankind cannot bear too much reality.”² That is, we typically don’t want to face the difficult truth about ourselves.

It is what Jim Collins says in one of the best books on leadership written over the last twenty-five years. It is called *Good to Great*. In that book, Collins describes how the best companies and organizations possess certain qualities, one of those being the capacity to confront problems, even when it hurts.³

Other qualities include trust and honesty: great leaders and great companies do not cast blame or ignore. They listen before they act. They cultivate character. They use pronouns like “we” and “us,” rather than “you” and “they.”

Go back and notice how Nehemiah, as a leader, addresses both God and the people: Nehemiah does not say, “That is their problem.” And he doesn’t say, “I didn’t have anything do with it.”

No, he says, “We have a problem.” “We have offended God. We have sinned against God.” Not “they,” but “we.”

It reminds me of the cute little story I read recently about two women who had never flown in an airplane. They both were afraid of flying, but they finally agreed to get on board a double-engine plane with thirty other passengers. They took off and not long into their flight, they heard a noise, and one of the women looked out the window of the other side of the plane and saw that engine had stopped. Her friend looked at her and said, “Oh no, what do we do now?” And the other woman said, “I wouldn’t worry about it. That is *their* side of the plane.”⁴

We can build up and work together, or we can blame and put down. Every crisis or challenge “we” face presents “us” with the opportunity to go either way.

Nehemiah Moment

Think of this way: God confronts every one of us – here and everywhere – with what I want to call “A Nehemiah Moment.”

² T.S. Elliot, The Four Quartets at www.tselliot.com.

³ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 2001), 65-68.

⁴ Thanks to James Merritt for this illustration at “Houston, We Have a Problem” (Nehemiah 1:1-11) at www.esermons.com.

A Nehemiah Moment is that moment when we can seek God's kingdom first, or we can place ourselves first, ahead of God (Matthew 6:33).

We can lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, or treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

We can pick up our cross and follow Jesus, or we can dismiss Jesus altogether and take the easy way out (Matthew 16:24).

We can examine ourselves in the light of God's love, or we can turn away and live in ignorance.

We can pray, and confess, and admit that we are part of a problem, or we can walk in denial.

There is a cost to discipleship.

Nehemiah knows this, and as we will discover, Nehemiah will experience resistance to rebuilding the city even as the people return from exile. The people are not going to listen to what Nehemiah has to say. Hence the challenge of doing several things all at the same time, dealing with problems from within and problems from without.

Hence the need for us to pay attention: to remember what God has done for us in Christ and to confess our need for forgiveness and healing; to examine our problems in the presence of God and to respond and live accordingly! Amen.