

“Dealing with Discouragement”

Nehemiah 4:1-6

August 2nd, 2020

Fourth in Series “A Time to Build”

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“So we rebuilt the wall to half its height...”

Nehemiah 4:6

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, hear us as we pray: listen to the hopes and fears of our hearts as we hear your Word and receive your Spirit: In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Sermon Message

I believe there is an old song that goes something like this: “Home, home, on the range; where the deer and the antelope play; where seldom is heard a discouraging word and the clouds are not cloudy all day.”

I have a feeling if we took a survey or a poll, we would discover that we do *not* seldom hear a discouraging word! Rather, I think we would find that all we hear is a discouraging word, where the skies seem overcast – or, at least, that seems to the case.

Has anyone heard a discouraging word?

As I shared during our mid-work word of encouragement on Facebook, I received an email this week by a fellow minister, who let me know how discouraged and mad, and angry and frustrated he was. Not simply with the pandemic and with the challenges of ministry, but with life, with the state of our world and country.

As a pastor, I often hear from people who share how discouraged they are! And it is typically not one thing – relationship, other family members, finances, work, health, school. It is easy to get discouraged! It is easy to get to the point where you don’t care, where you feel overwhelmed, where you just don’t know what to do with the burdens you are carrying.

What's the old saying? Life can be one "darn-thing after another"! In fact, that's history! I don't want to burst anyone's bubble, but I would imagine that if we had lived in 1860s, we would have been discouraged, as the nation came apart. And I would imagine that had we lived in the 1930s (and some here have) we would have been discouraged during the Great Depression.

We are not alone if we think we are the only ones who feel they have had to deal with discouragement. If you are a person who cares, who loves, you will deal with discouragement!

Yes, the present global pandemic is a cause for discouragement. On a personal level, I have been very discouraged with how we as a country, compared to other countries, have deal with this virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was so hopeful about all the ways we were coming together, working together, and I believe we have on state and local levels, but over time, it looks more and more as if we as a society have fallen back into tribal warfare. And it is discouraging! We need to be fighting the virus, not each other.

In addition, it is discouraging that we as a country still cannot reckon with our past and come to grips with the color of a person's skin. There are days when I think, as Americans, we live on different planets because we have become aliens to one another.

In fact, if there is a biblical story that captures our moment, I think it is the story of the Tower of Babel: we just do not understand each other. It is as if we speak past each other. We babble. We might as well be speaking different languages (Genesis 11:1-9).

To be sure, I cannot speak for you as to what discourages you, but I am very discouraged about the state of relationships among all people of color and with the lack of moral leadership that is required to address it. Being human means learning to deal with discouragement.

Dealing with Discouragement

It is why, when dealing with discouragement, we need to recognize a couple things: First, we need to recognize that discouragement exists. It is a *universal* aspect of life. From Germany to South Africa, people deal with discouragement.

Whether we are a parent in Guatemala or a parent in Indiana, we will have to contend with feelings of disappointment, despair.

Second, we need to understand that, like a virus, discouragement is also contagious. I don't know if you have ever been in a meeting where pessimism can spread like wildfire, but it can change the whole tenor of the meeting! Someone lights a match and poof!

Now, to be sure, this second point is difficult because we all get discouraged, so it is almost impossible to isolate ourselves totally from folks who are negative about others or something because that *includes us all*.

However, I believe we all can find ways of dealing with discouragement. We do not have to fall into the hands of Patty the Pessimist or Danny the Discourager or Carl the Cynic.

Nehemiah's Challenge

That's where our passage today comes into the picture. Yes, we have been going through the Book of Nehemiah, and we have been learning how Nehemiah is working to rebuild the city of Jerusalem after other attempts failed. Nehemiah has tried to rally the people and put together a plan to honor the past but also look forward to the future (Nehemiah 2:1-11).

In our passage, however, it is clear that not everyone wants to see Nehemiah carryout the rebuilding efforts: on the one hand, there is a man by the name of San-ballat who mocks Nehemiah and the Jews for their work (4:2). How in the world can they take burned-stones and use them as a foundation? It is so foolish.

On the other hand, there is the Ammonite general, Tobiah, who says the whole wall could fall to the ground if a little fox were to walk on it (4:3). Not exactly a word of encouragement.

Indeed, the way we might want to read these words here in this chapter is to read them as words full of sarcasm, aimed at threatening, and discouraging and taunting Nehemiah and the Jewish people (4:1-3). It is a reminder that this whole project faces threats from without and from within (4:10-12).

Nehemiah's Prayer

But note how Nehemiah responds! As we have been sharing, Nehemiah prays. Only this prayer is not what we might envision as a prayer for the singing of Kum-bah-Yah. No, it is what biblical scholars call an “imprecatory prayer.”¹

It is a prayer with a long history in Israel, especially in the Psalms and in the Prophets.² And it is a prayer that we often hear from people who are discouraged or frustrated with what is happening; or who feel or sense that God's work is under attack. As such, it is a prayer that we hear when people feel “fed up,” or when they do not like what others are saying about them or God.

It is often controversial; and it is why it is the important thing to remember about this kind of prayer is that it *gives room to God for God to judge*. Even though the person's heart might be full of discouraging, even vindictive, thoughts about his or her enemy, the person, in the prayer, *leaves it to God to act accordingly*.³

This is what the prophet Jeremiah writes before the people go into Exile in Babylon in 586 BC (Jeremiah 15:10-18). Jeremiah is so “depressed” with the leaders of his country and with how the people are not listening – that he says, “Okay, God, if they are not going to listen to me and turn to you, then [God] let the judgement come!”

In this way, it is a prayer that speaks from the heart in great honesty, even anger, but that *lets God be God!*

I have a feeling that if we went around the room we would discover that many of us have prayed such a prayer! I know I have! How feelings of anger and despair rise up within!

¹ See Ralph Klein, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 773.

² See Psalm 10:15, Psalm 35, Psalm 109, as examples; see also Jeremiah 18:21-23, Ezekiel 9:10, Joel 3:4.

³ Ralph Klein, “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” 773.

But remember: this is also a prayer that stands in tension with Jesus' own prayer in the Sermon on the Mount: to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44). This prayer is also about letting God be God, as the heart seeks not deny that we do not have enemies (we do), but admits that our enemies are deserving of our prayers as well, if not more so, as the heart seeks to connect with God and to bear good fruit, amidst the challenges (Matthew 7:15-20).

Now, in the case of Nehemiah: he is letting God know what he is feeling. No doubt about it! Yes, he is discouraged with the response of those who are trying to stop the work, and yes, he is wanting to heap coals upon their heads (Nehemiah 4:4-5). But he is also wanting, despite the negativity, to continue the work – even amidst the difficulties (4:6).

Yes, discouragement is part of the work, but it is not the last word.

Alternatives to Discouragement

I believe that it was the New Testament theologian, William Barclay, who once said, “We live in a world of broken hearts.” Yes, we do. Indeed, at this moment in time, it is overwhelming the amount of news and information that speaks of such brokenness. And it is discouraging! It is discouraging going on social media. It is discouraging hearing what we can say and do to each other.

But here's the deal: we don't need to let such discouragement win. We have alternatives as Christians: we have the Gospel! We have gifts like faith, hope, and love.⁴ We have treasures like Holy Communion and Baptism. We have the fruit of the Spirit to bear like joy and patience and kindness and self-control.⁵ And we have a God who is for us and not against us.⁶ We worship a God who, in Christ, raises us up from the pits of discouragement and who will execute justice against those who deny justice to others, especially among the most vulnerable (as justice belongs to the Lord).⁷

Nehemiah depends on this truth, even as he tries to continue the work amidst all the challenges – letting God provide the resources and allowing God to have God's way! For in the end that is the only Way that matters!⁸ In time, God will

⁴ I Corinthians 13:1-13.

⁵ Galatians 5:21-22.

⁶ Romans 8:31.

⁷ Romans 12:19 and Deuteronomy 32:35.

⁸ John 14:6.

have God's way: not in death, but in life. Not despair, but forgiveness. Not threats, but promises. That's Gospel! That's our Way!

Dear church: let the building continue! Let it continue! Even now! Amen.