

“Team-work, Dream-work”
Third in a series on Nehemiah
And next to him were...Neh. 3
July 26, 2020
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - Build in us a desire to restore, renew, and rebuild our faith O God; our faith in you, in one another, our society, and in ourselves. Amen.

Message

It was June 2008 when I arrived in Franklin, Indiana. The streets were covered with streaks of mud. The banks of the creek through town were a tangled mess of grass, weeds, tree trunks, trash, and in some places, picnic tables, lawn chairs, and yard decor. Sidewalks in front of apartment buildings, store fronts, and houses were piled with furniture, moldy mattresses, ruined merchandise, and destroyed appliances. Water lines still etched the sides of buildings, bridges, and telephone poles. The parks looked like washed out desert wadis. Cars sat half buried in mud. And the summer crops were decimated in most places.

It was two weeks after the flood waters had finally receded enough for people to see the damage, assess what had to be done, sort through what could be kept, decide what had to be tossed; discern what could be repaired or salvaged, and determine what was a complete loss.

It was devastating, and I didn't even live here. I didn't grow up going to the Artcraft theater, or taking laps around the courthouse square. I didn't spend my summers at the pool or playing in the parks. I didn't count on the corn or soybean crop for my livelihood. I didn't have friends who lived next to the creek, whose foundation shifted from the force of the water. I didn't have family buried in the cemetery along 31 where headstones were washed away.

It was reported that no corner of Johnson County was left untouched by flooding that summer! It didn't take long to realize it was going to take weeks, months, even years to recover. AND it was evident no one was going to be able to recover, restore, or rebuild on their own. It was going to take teamwork. It was going to take organizing, planning, resourcing, time, energy, and a willingness of folks to work together for the good of the whole.

If there is anyone who knows what it takes to rebuild, restore, and repair something, it is Nehemiah. We continue our series from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Today we investigate chapter three and discover how God brought all kinds of people from all over Jerusalem and the surrounding area for one common cause - the rebuilding of the city wall. I challenge you today, to consider what else was being rebuilt, repaired, or restored under the leadership of Nehemiah and according to the promise of God.

READ TEXT - Neh. 3:1-5

Did you hear how many people had gathered to work?

6 individual names

7 family names

4 different group names : priests, men of Jericho, sons of Hassenaah, and certain Tekoites.

And that is just in the first 5 verses of the chapter (and about all the names I could pronounce!). There are 33 more individual and family names in the verses that follow as well as 8 or 9 more group names.

Each one taking on a certain section of the wall. Each one bringing what they knew, tools they had, and a desire to make things better for all. Very few of them professional builders. Very few of them educated

architects, professional land surveyors, masons, carpenters, or the like. Each one recognizing what the other could do for the good of the whole. Further evidence of the teamwork approach is the fact that the phrase “next to/after him” is repeated over 20 times in the 32 versus of chapter 3.

Next to him was so and so. And next to him was this group, this family, this body of believers. And next to him was so and so family and their daughters (later on in the chapter). After him was so and so, son of that family, and after him was that group from over there.

It is key to notice Nehemiah did not build, repair, or restore this wall alone. Nothing is rebuilt, restored, or repaired in isolation, and in this context it is not necessarily building from the ground up, the word used means to strengthen, fortify, make stronger. Take what was there and make it better, if the foundation is good build on it, if not fix it.

What if Nehemiah wasn't just rebuilding a wall? What if God was using Nehemiah to rebuild, restore, and repair the identity of the people of God - the followers who were exiled and whose history was long forgotten by many? What if God was using Nehemiah to rebuild, restore, and repair the sense of security and community? What if God was using Nehemiah to rebuild, restore, and repair broken systems and relationships?

What if God is using Nehemiah to remind, retell, reclaim, rebuild, restore, and repair our sense of community, severed relationships, a fractured culture, or dysfunctional systems?

It wasn't simply the physical walls of Jerusalem that were destroyed, dismantled, or torn apart, it was the people, relationships, and community identity as well. It wasn't only the wall that was reduced to rubble in some places, it was the way people, groups, families, and systems were divided, isolated, and severed from one another and from God.

God used Nehemiah to rebuild people just as much as that wall.

Could it be the same for us today? Are we in need of being made stronger? Is our society in need of repair? Are their groups within our society in need of restoration?

Long before this pandemic the answer was yes. Long before wearing a mask became a political statement the answer was yes. Long before we let things fall apart this much, the answer was yes. This is not the worst situation humanity has faced and it will not be the last of what humanity has to struggle through. This is not the first clash of power or political divisiveness and it will not be the last.

BUT this can be our Nehemiah moment. It is our moment to stand in the rubble, take inventory, no matter how painful it is to look at, no matter how vulnerable we need to be, and decide to repair what has been broken, rebuild what has been destroyed, and restore what has been neglected or ignored.

This can be our moment to make strong, fortify, and build our connection to first of all God, and then to one another. And by one another I mean it's time to recognize, listen to, and work alongside those we don't always agree with; those who we have been taught to fear, demonize, and hate; those who have been taught to fear, demonize and hate us; those we would rather leave to work on the other side of the wall; their side, not our side.

Come on church - come on people of God, we can do better. We can be better.

We can be like geese! You've seen geese fly in that classic and beautiful V formation. What you may or may not know is their reason for doing so. Scientists at Cal Tech do. They put their computers and flight

simulators to work and discovered that geese form this pattern because it is the easiest and most efficient way to fly long distances. The formation acts aerodynamically like a single wing; that is, wind drag is distributed equally across all the birds. This in turn reduces drag on each individual bird. Twenty-five geese flying together in a “V” formation can travel 70% farther than one goose flying alone. Because the lead goose actually situates itself slightly behind the perfect point position of the V, the geese that follow relieve some of its wind drag, and it does not have to work any harder than the others. When the lead goose grows tired, it simply drops to the back of the V and the next goose moves into position. All the squawking and honking may sound like just noise to us, but it is actually how the geese encourage one another to keep on keeping on.

It is not about whose wings are prettier, stronger, or bigger. It is not about whose feathers are patterned perfectly or not. It is not about whose beak or feet are “flawed.” It is about recognizing and working for the good of the whole, not just the advance of the one.

You are one. I am one. But together we are the whole.

I think part of the lesson for us in Nehemiah 3 is the realization is nothing gets repaired, rebuilt, restored in and of itself. From the rubble of our lives, the crumbling of any given situation, or the decline of our society, government, or whatever, we cannot rise alone; we cannot be a community of one. It takes courage, compassion, and cooperation to rebuild, repair, or restore what God has gifted us. One stone, one person, on prayer at a time and it takes all of us. All means all.

AMEN