

August 27 2017

Reading from the Bible *Nehemiah 1:1-11*

Sermon Return, Rebuild, Renew

We have heard the story of how the people of God in the northern Kingdom were scattered by the Syrian soldier and were never to be found again. The people in the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin laughed at that scattering until Babylon lurked on their edges of their country. Between 597 and 586 BC when 10,000 of their best and most elite people were shipped off to Babylon. Well Babylon would fall and was taken over by Persia. And in 531 Cyrus made a very generous and important edict allowing the people to go home. This was a generous move but also self-serving because he established a requirement that they would pay taxes to the king. So it was a profitable move for him to send them back and even to provide them with the materials they would need to rebuild in return for the taxes. They built a modest temple which took them 20 years to build. They were harassed endlessly by their neighbors. And finally the kingdom had to make an edict that they could finish the temple.

In our sermon this morning, we find Nehemiah in Susa which was in Persia also Iran. It was 143 years since the deportation; 83 years to the return and 70 years since the temple was completed. The people were in dire straits. And like every good person of God they looked toward Jerusalem as the symbol of God's blessing. He like Daniel prayed much like the story of Daniel, who prayed three times a day facing Jerusalem.

So Nehemiah asked, "What's the news? Remember they didn't have the internet but they did have means of communication. The message he got from his brother, Jerusalem was still a wreck. All the survivors are in great trouble, they are ashamed and they are vulnerable. They were at risk. Jerusalem's wall has fallen down and the gates have been burned and destroyed. Nehemiah wept for the shame of the people. He had never been there yet he wept for them. When he gets the news, Nehemiah goes to pray immediately. And we know a lot about Nehemiah because of his prayer. He was able to put one foot in the political part of Persia and one foot firmly established as the follower and worshiper of God and trust in promises of God. He is the King's cupbearer and that put him into a very important and serious position. He tasted all the food and drink that the king ate or drank. He could poison the king but he is trusted. He was close to the king. He was honored. He had the king's ear and he was in the inner circle of the king. But he still wanted to support the Jews that were deported by the Babylonians. He was a thousand miles from Jerusalem. He had strong steadfast faith in God. He understood God's covenant with the Jewish people. God had chosen these people

for no reason at all. And God had asked of them to be faithful. But they didn't do such a hot job of it. It was 143 years since the people had been taken from their homeland and their culture had changed. They were not faithful to God. Nehemiah and his family had not been faithful. Nehemiah prayed to God—"You said if your people will turn to you and obey you, you will bring them back. You will be faithful to them." He reminds God of the depth of God's love in choosing these people.

Now Nehemiah has a plan in mind, the wheels are going in his head and he had a heart for the people. He has the gift to administer and he knows how to do it. He has a heart and he has compassion for the people but he goes to prayer first, So often I and we try to run ahead of God. Nehemiah reminds us that before we take off with our plan, we need to go to knees and talk to God. He believed greatly in God's grace and mercy. In spite of the fact, the people had turned away. Nehemiah did not blame God at all. God was absolutely fair in allowing them to be taken from their home land. He believes that God will be faith and sufficient regardless of any human expectations might be. Nehemiah asks for God's help for the people. He asks for himself and he asks for boldness to go to the king and follow through on the plan. After this prayer of intercession and supplication he goes to the king. He goes to the king Artaxerxes and he asks for help, Building a wall could be a hot political move and could look rearmament. It could look the Jews were getting ready to rise up and fight the Persia. But Nehemiah presents his case in a way that king can understand his plan. As shocked as he was when he heard the story, he called upon the Creator God, who made a covenant with his people and he made subtle reminder that God has a responsibility for these people. He sums up their history over and over again. God had been constant in his love for his people.

Now Judah was a buffer state and in Judah we find they have some enemies from Samaria and some enemies from Arabia. But God is behind the scenes working to help them rebuild the wall and also behind the scenes to open up King Artaxerxes' heart. And Nehemiah is like Esther was the person for such a time as this. Nehemiah had the gift that was needed at that time. He became a partner with Ezra. We see in the Bible the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are together. They are contemporary. Ezra is concerned about the people's religion- the law and how people are to obey them. Nehemiah is organizer. There was something about his strategy that is amazing as he works with his countrymen. He is the community organizer. And they come together and work as a team in Jerusalem. The country was at risk. It was overrun by Samaritans or it might be overrun by Arabians or the Persians might come back. It had to do with community people working together. It had to do with cohesiveness, the working together as a group. Have you noticed that a group of people can get a lot done when they work together?

For example, a church group come together to paint an hundred year old church. In south central Wyoming the group came together to clean and paint their church. Each day I was able to higher on the scaffolding. I didn't get to the top but I got darn near to it. The workers became very close because they worked on that project. The power of the people. Nehemiah worked with the people. They had a modest temple. It wasn't anything like the beautiful temple Solomon had built and the people were unhappy. It was nothing like that beautiful temple.

In the book of Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 8, Nehemiah writes, the king granted me what I asked. because the gracious hand of God. When we are in line with God, we know that peace that is beyond all peace. Chapter 2: 11-18 So Nehemiah took a survey of the wall. " He got up during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. They built and they built. Verse 19 Sanballat, the Horomite, Tibia, the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab mocked them and said, "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" In other words, threaten them and so Nehemiah organized and they put up the Sheep Gate and they put up the Jericho Gate. Chapter 3:3 The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenah. As each gate was finished it was put up and they started working on the wall. You could almost see the excitement of the people as they could see the progress on the wall.

How many of you were here when this church was built? Several hands went up. That was awesome wasn't it to see a new church come up out of the ashes. There are people who believe that every 60 or 70 years people should build a new church building. Building a church is a major project but that is when people come together and work together. So the people in our story got excited and all work together as they made repairs and it goes on and on. Even the women and children helped in the project. The keep building and building and all of a sudden there are hostile threats. You can read about that in chapter 4. What happened was the people started getting threatened. The wall was built because the people had a mind to work I just love the way Nehemiah keeps them all together. But once they feel threaten they had to get organized in shifts. They worked early morning until late at night. They had guards while they were working. They would hold a tool in

one hand and a weapon in the other. And they would guard at night. They watched because their enemies wanted to tear down their work. Verse 21: At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water."

Then there were more problems. There were complaints. There was an outcry. The people said they had to farm and they had to do other things. Their vineyards and animals. They had to do everything. But they get the wall done And the people of God slowly were becoming more a people of God And the story goes on in detail. It is worth reading. And there are a couple more sermons.

But what I would like to point out-there are three things that I would like you to take away from this sermon And one comes from a verse in Ephesians- Paul reminds us in chapter 3 verse 21 about what God can do. "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen"

From the power within us, God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. You might have a pretty good imagination but have use our gifts. Our take away is that God is concerned about sacred and secular-divide the world up. Wherever we are planted is, whatever gifts we have and how we use them. Nehemiah was in the right place and at the right time but if he didn't have compassion on the situation and asked for help from God, it would not have gone no further. If he was just sad or sorrowful over the violence but it is another thing to have compassion for us to and ask ourselves for hold boldness and say-what do I do now? As Paul said, God is incredibly able to do far more that what we can expect.

When I was looking for another interim position, I had calls from Colorado and South Dakota. But what did God do, he planted me where he wanted me to be in this wonderful place with you wonderful people, I couldn't even picture that as I worked on my profile. Is God capable to answer our concerns and our desires to serve him? Yes, much more than we can imagine.

I like Nehemiah he is practical. He got the job done and he loved the Lord.

Gracious God, Thank you for these stories in the Bible. We are reminded that the stories are about real people who lived in real places and who did amazing things in your name. We ask you to help us claim the power and majesty and the desire that you have for all people with love. And we ask to the power to be emboldened that your kingdom can come on earth as it is heaven. Amen