6-17/18-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Nehemiah 1:11-2:18 Nehemiah’s Burden to Build Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

At the Cornerstone Class social gathering on Friday night, every class member had to write down one sentence to describe themselves and everyone else had to guess who said what.

The biggest stumper of the night was “Founder of a rifle club in high school.” The person who wrote down that description was the last person anyone expected. If you want to know who that was, you will have to ask a class member.

Two weeks ago on America’s Got Talent, the last person many expected to have a beautiful singing voice got the golden buzzer pushed for her by Simon Cowell, sending her straight to the live shows. Mandy Harvey has been deaf for 10 years, since age 18, yet never gave up her passion for singing even though she cannot hear herself.

Gaston Ntambo, missionary pilot for Wings of the Morning, still shares that when as a child his family could not even afford a pair of shoes for him, he was the last person anyone expected to be given the opportunity to travel to the US and be trained as a pilot then return home and save lives with his training.

I have pastor friends who because of their backgrounds were the last persons anyone in their high school classes would have expected to now be in ministry. Ever know anyone like that?

Who comes to your mind as the last person you expected…to stay married for 50 years, to be a wonderful, loving Father, to make a difference in the world around them.

Nehemiah was the last person anyone would have expected to rebuild the walls around the city of Jerusalem. He lived over 1000 miles away in Susa, the capital of Persia. Although he was a Jew, Nehemiah lived within the palace of the king of Persia. He was a cupbearer for the king, a servant, not a tradesman or a builder. Nehemiah was the last person anyone expected to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

And God liked it that way.

How often throughout the Scriptures do we see God use the willingness of ordinary men and women of faith to accomplish extraordinary things. Abraham and Sarah became the foundation of a great nation. A teenage girl named Mary became the mother to the Messiah.

How often in our own lives have we seen God work through ordinary men and women of faith to make a difference in the lives of others. I think back to youth leaders and Sunday School teachers, to grandparents and faith-filled saints in previous churches who all have made a difference in my life.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, who now remotely claimed control of the land of Israel. Keep in mind the location of Israel was a prime piece of property for the trade routes of the Middle East, so throughout history many wars have been fought for control of the area.

Once the Jews settled in that land, they eventually were conquered by the Assyrians, who were then conquered by the Babylonians, who were then conquered by the Persians, who were then conquered by Alexander the Great.

When the Babylonians conquered the area in 586 BCE, they burned down the Temple and destroyed the city of Jerusalem before forcibly removing many of the Jews into exile.

When Babylon fell to the Persians in 539 BCE, the king of Persia then allowed some of the Jews to return home. Home, however, lay in ruins. Because they were the people of God, rebuilding the Temple became their first priority, and after 20 years of hard labor, the Second Temple was dedicated in 515 BCE as a beacon of faith and hope to a scattered people.

Consider here in the US towns that have been destroyed by fire, wind and water. Schools are often one of the first buildings to be completed to give hope that the town will return to life.

Churches will often try hard to be rebuilt to continue to shine God’s light into their communities and be a place of refuge.

The Temple in Jerusalem was completed first, and houses were rebuilt family by family. Yet for another 70 years the walls still lay in ruins, leaving the townspeople vulnerable to attack from marauding bandits and power hungry neighbors.

Many Jews, including Nehemiah, remained in exile in Persia, 1000 miles away from their ancestral homeland. Many had grown up knowing no other home.

Nehemiah had an important position as cupbearer to the king. He was a trusted servant whose daily task was to taste the king’s wine to ensure no one tried to poison the king. If Nehemiah was satisfied the wine was fine, he personally carried the wine to the king. Having been in faithful service for some years, Nehemiah came to know the king’s personality and habits, and the king in turn relied on Nehemiah as a trusted and important servant.

One day, in the year 445 BCE, Nehemiah received a visit from his brother, Hanani, who along with a few others had traveled from Jerusalem to Susa, the capital of Persia. Nehemiah inquired about “the Jews who had escaped and survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.” (1.2)

Although Nehemiah was in service in the palace of the king, he had been schooled in the stories of his faith ancestors.

Nehemiah was absolutely distraught when told, “Those in the province who survived the captivity are in great trouble and shame! The wall around Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire!” (1.3)

Nehemiah prayed and mourned and fasted and wept for days over this disturbing news.

In his heart of hearts Nehemiah believed that the people of Israel had been unfaithful to Almighty God, so he also began to offer up ongoing prayers of confession for failing to keep the Commandments.

For four months Nehemiah prayed for the plight of Jerusalem. For four months God laid upon Nehemiah’s heart a burden for his people’s Promised Land. Then God laid upon Nehemiah’s heart a burden to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the needs of those around us? Have you ever been paralyzed by inaction because the needs are so great in our community and in our world and you have no idea where or how to start? Have you ever found yourself tuning out during news headlines because the constant barrage of need and negativity is so prevalent it is no longer newsworthy?

There are times I admit I have found myself numb to the needs surrounding us, in our community and in our world. I confess there have been times I have even become cynical.

Yet God calls us as Christians to care for all of God’s children, near and far. Each congregation, however, will figure out how they can best care for others, depending on their location and gifts, their passions and personalities.

This congregation cares for children through preschool, ACE, special collections and even Interfaith Hospitality Network. How much of our mission ministry currently reaches out to families in need?

Many missions are begun because someone’s heart breaks over the plight of someone else, and through prayer and partnerships new ministries are then formed.

That is what happened to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah’s heart continued to weep for the need expressed for his ancestral homeland of Jerusalem, especially the need for new walls to protect God’s people, God’s city and God’s Temple.

So Nehemiah found himself with a burden from God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He was not a carpenter. He was not a tradesman. Most likely he did not own any tool or weapon other than his tongue and his tray. Yet God laid upon his heart a burden to build, and God called him forward to personally lead the rebuilding effort.

Can you imagine what Nehemiah must have been thinking or saying to himself when he realized the vision God had placed upon his heart, for a homeland over 1000 miles away, for the hope of future generations?

God, you want me to do what? You want me to say what to my king? Is there any other way to accomplish your plan, any other person you can send other than me?

How many other voices have we heard in Scripture arguing with God, wondering if God had chosen the wrong person for whatever God had in mind? How many others have tried to use excuses not to follow the call of God upon their lives?

\*Moses said, I don’t speak so good

\*Timothy and Jeremiah tried to say, but I’m just a kid

\*Isaiah proclaimed he was a man of unclean lips

\*Elijah bemoaned that he was all alone in his work as a prophet

Excuses don’t work for God. When we say “why me,” God says “trust me.”

Have you ever heard the voice of God, or felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit, or encountered a holy 2 x 4 that without a doubt is God directing you to your next faithful step, inviting you down a new path of ministry, or even showing you a vision of the future?

For four months Nehemiah had fasted and prayed for the city of Jerusalem, until his passion became so great he could no longer ignore God’s leading, and his burden for the people there began to show in his countenance.

As cupbearer, Nehemiah was never to show any sadness or sorrow or even melancholy in front of the king. One could get thrown out of the palace, thrown in jail, or even killed for doing so. So Nehemiah risked his life by showing on his face what was in his heart. And the king was quick to notice. Yet instead of dismissing Nehemiah immediately, the king asked, “Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.” (2.2) Here was the opportunity Nehemiah had prayed for, and God was opening the door of the king’s heart.

No wonder the next line of our Scripture is Nehemiah reflecting, “Then I was very much afraid.”

Nehemiah have every right to be afraid, for not only had he risked his life to show his sadness, his next words would essentially be asking the king for a policy reversal, for in Ezra 4:21 it is recorded that King Artaxerxes had declared after the Temple was rebuilt: “Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city will not be rebuilt until I so order.” Nehemiah knew it would take the power of God to get the king to change his mind.

Nehemiah was afraid, yet his faith was greater than his fear.

Nehemiah boldly declared: “May the king live forever! Why shouldn’t I seem sad when the city, the place of my family’s graves, is in ruins and its gates destroyed by fire?” (2.3) Nehemiah shared how he felt personally, without any political commentary on how the city came to be in such a state of ruin.

And instead of dismissing Nehemiah’s passion, King Artaxerxes instinctively knew that something greater was on Nehemiah heart and mind. So the king asked, “What is it that you need?” (2.4)

Notice what Nehemiah does next. He sends up a quick prayer to God, what we might call an arrow prayer. Because Nehemiah had been in constant prayer for four months, Nehemiah did not need a hail mary prayer at this time, but a quick reminder of who was his ultimate authority and a reminder to trust God for strength and guidance of what to say next.

Following that brief prayer, Nehemiah gave the king what US Army Chaplain Robert Leroe called a “decision briefing on what he will need and the time-frame it should entail. He will need a leave of absence [to rebuild the walls], royal authorization [in order to do the work], logistical support [in the forms of timbers from the royal forest], a security detail, and [letters for] safe passage.”

--Robert Leroe “Rise and Rebuild” 2-4-13 sermoncentral.com adapted

(US Army Chaplain Lt Colonel)

Wonder of wonders, King Artaxerxes trusted his faithful servant, and granted his request. Yet Nehemiah knew the request had only been granted Only by the “gracious hand of God.” (2.8)

Chaplain Robert Leroe also often said that

..In the Army there are 3 kinds of people…

-Those who make things happen;

-Those who watch things happen;

-Those who wonder, “What happened?”

Nehemiah was a leader who--by God’s grace--made things happen.

--Robert Leroe “Rise and Rebuild” 2-4-13 sermoncentral.com

(US Army Chaplain Lt Colonel)

Nehemiah was going to make happen what many had given up hope of ever happening—the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. God’s promises spoken through the prophet Isaiah about the walls of the holy city were finally coming true.

With the blessing of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah set out not only with the appropriate travel letters, but also with members of the Persian army and cavalry. When the neighboring provincial governors saw who had come and why, they were upset, as they all still wanted Jerusalem for their own territory or enjoyed having a weak neighbor.

Under cover of night Nehemiah realized the enormity of the task ahead of him, as he rode beside the mile of wall, noting what walls and gates were worse than others, and forming a more specific plan for the work ahead. Building the wall would not be easy, as it would be

…more than a mile long, three or four feet thick, and fifteen to twenty feet high.

--Brian Bill “How to Tackle a Tough Job” 5-21-03 sermoncentral.com

Nehemiah knew that he could not build alone, or even with the few Persian men of might who were with him. So three days after his arrival, he finally met with “the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.” (2.16) He invited them on the journey of what God would do through them.

And wonder of wonder, in 52 days, the walls of Jerusalem were built.

Nehemiah was an unlikely hero for the people of God, a humble foreign servant in the palace of the king who became a strong leader, trusting in God and God alone to guide him. If you read his entire story in the book of Nehemiah, you will find that not only did he complete the walls, but he was also appointed Governor of Judah. He protected his people not only from their enemies, while calling the Jews back home, he also protected them from themselves, encouraging their return to faithful worship of Almighty God.

His story matters to us here today.

Nehemiah reminds us that when God calls, God equips.

Nehemiah reminds us that prayer is critical to knowing the heart of God, knowing God’s plan for our lives, and knowing how to follow God’s plan step by faithful step.

And Nehemiah reminds us that often the ministry of God is best done when we work together.

May we learn from Nehemiah as we continue on in ministry here at First UMC, praying for God’s guidance, praying for God’s leading, praying for God’s strength to be the people of God in this time and in this place.

May it be so. Let us pray.