

rePOSE - NEHEMIAH - WANDERING TO WORD
A SERMON BASED ON NEHEMIAH 8:1-12
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2019
10:00 a.m.

The book of Nehemiah is one you might have trouble finding in your Bible.

We don't go there very often.

After valiantly reading all those names,

Jim may never go there again.

But the story found in the book of Nehemiah,

and also in the book Ezra,

is a powerful one and surprisingly relevant.

It is a relevant story for anyone who has seen their world collapse,

and have tried to rebuild.

It is a powerful story for anyone who has seen

the walls that defined their life come crashing down.

The walls that defined the city of Jerusalem had come down.

One hundred years prior,
the Babylonians had come and invaded the city.
They tore down the walls.
They burned the gates.
They carried away the young people
and the brightest and best into captivity.
In the Bible its called the Babylonian exile.

Over time, Babylon itself fell to the Persians.
Jerusalem continued to lie in ruins.
Nehemiah was a descendant of those Jews in exile
those who had been taken captive from Jerusalem.
No doubt he had heard stories from the elderly,
about how beautiful the city had been,
how stunning Solomon's temple had been.

God moved Nehemiah with a vision of restoring the people of God.
Nehemiah's first step was prayer.
You can read his prayer in chapter one.
It's beautiful.

In his prayer Nehemiah speaks to God

as the great and awesome God.

He confesses that he and his people had neglected God.

Nehemiah admitted that their exile

was simply a reflection of how in their hearts

they had moved away from God

well before the exile happened.

Nehemiah called on God

to honour his promise to bring restoration,

to rebuild and redefine Jerusalem

Then Nehemiah asked God for success

in a meeting with the king of Persia.

Nehemiah writes,

‘Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me,

the king granted my requests’.

The king gave Nehemiah letters of passage

and an armed escort to keep him safe

on the trip back to Jerusalem to rebuild.

Nehemiah started with hope.

He personally surveyed the walls and gates of the destroyed city.

He told the people about God's favour,

and the king's support,

and they said, 'Let's start rebuilding.'

The governors of the area mocked their efforts.

What are those feeble Jews doing?

Will they restore their wall?

Will they offer sacrifices? Get their temple back?

Will they finish in a day?

Can they bring the stones back to life?

Tobiah's mocking was particularly vivid.

'What they are building -

if even a little fox climbed up on it,

he would break down their wall of stone.'

Do you know what you are doing?

Are you done yet?

The people trying to rebuild started to lose heart.

They said, 'The strength of the labourers is giving out,
and there is so much rubble, we cannot rebuild the wall.'
Wherever we turn, our enemies are going to attack us.

Nehemiah writes, they said it ten times over.

It was like a chant.

We can't do it. Over, and over, and over, and over.

We can't.

It was the negative emotional valley of the middle,
of a wall half defined, of a job not quite finished,
of an uncertain path,
of a future that wouldn't look like
either the present or the past.

Nehemiah wasn't naive.

It takes a lot to rebuild and redefine after a collapse.

Nehemiah stopped what had become the 10 fold chant of

'We can't do it.', 'I can't do it.'

and instead told the people

to remember the Lord,

who is great and who is awesome,
the Lord he had prayed to in exile,
the Lord who had got them this far.

Nehemiah wasn't just interested in rebuilding for rebuilding's sake.

Nehemiah was building a place where God could thrive.

In the second half of this book,

Nehemiah helped the poor.

He returned the land to the people.

He restored the government of the people.

He cared for the economy.

He brought exiles home.

He brought back a life of worship.

He restored the Sabbath and Holy Festivals.

He had Scripture read to the people.

He lead the people into a new covenant,

a renewed and new relationship with God.

He wasn't just rebuilding walls.

The redefining was the work of remembering God

who was great and awesome.

The people were hungry.

They were hungry for the redefinition.

The old world had collapsed.

They were trying to rebuild a new world

but they had forgotten the One who ultimately defines us.

But they wanted to remember.

Today' text says 'all the people' came together as one.

Men and women and all who were able to understand.

They told Ezra the teacher of the Law

to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses.

All the people could see Ezra because they had built him a platform.

They wanted to see. They wanted to hear.

When Ezra stood to read, in respect they all stood to hear.

All the people listened attentively.

The Scripture was read, and it was interpreted.

It was made clear,

The meaning was given so that people understood it.

The Word was reverently read,
painstakingly interpreted
and worshipfully received.

Unexpectedly, surprisingly perhaps,
the people wept.

They had been weeping as they listened to the words of Scripture.

It doesn't say why.

We have to empathize and imagine.

What would bring someone to tears
hearing the Book of the Law of Moses read?

It could have been

the reminder of how much had been lost, and forgotten.

It could have been

regret at how things had broken down so completely.

It could have been

feeling overwhelmed at how much there
was still to do.

It could have been feeling inadequate to the call God was putting
upon their lives.

We don't know why, but they were weeping.

There can be something sincere and genuine about tears,
so it feels like this might be a good thing, this weeping.

But Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites who were there translating all said,
No. "This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep."

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks,
and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord.

Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The joy of the Lord is your strength.

It was the first day of the seventh month.

You don't know what that day is.

In Canada, with our modern calendar,

you know what that day is.

The first day of the seventh month.

Canada Day.

Nehemiah wasn't celebrating Canada Day.

It was Rosh Hashanah.

The Feast of Trumpets.

The start of a new year.

It was new years.

It was the day of resolutions, new beginnings, fresh starts.

Unsure of what was coming,

regretting what was past and forgotten

wondering what was present

wandering and a little lost,

gathered to hear the Word,

it would be natural to weep.

But the Word said,

this was not a day or a time for weeping.

This time of remembering, of redefinition, of relearning.

It was not a day for weeping.

It was the first day of the seventh month.

It was a new day.

A new year.

A new start.

Scripture reminded them

that before them was a day holy to the Lord God.

Before them was the new start.

Nehemiah and Ezra said,

‘Do not mourn or weep.

Do not grieve,

for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Listen to what the writer of Psalm 19 says happens,

when one is put in front of the word of God,

when one reads,

when one hears,

when one experiences,

when one remembers

when one is redefined by the word of God.

The Psalmist says, the word is perfect. It revives the soul.

It is trustworthy. It makes the simple wise.

It is right. It gives joy to the heart.

It is radiant. It gives light to the eyes.

It is pure. It endures forever.

It is sure. It is altogether righteous.

It is more precious than gold. It is sweeter than honey.

It warns your servant.

In listening, there is great reward.

In this Psalm we are shown that

Creation praises, God speaks, and God's people respond.

It is a pattern we repeat on Sunday mornings.

We gather, singing praise, offering a prayer of praise,
bringing our offering.

We hear God speak, in Scripture and the sermon.

We respond, with our prayers,
and returning to the world in obedience.

We remember and we are redefined.

When the walls come down and the world collapses,

when we are trying to put it all back together,

The word reminds us.

Today is a day holy to God.

It is a fresh start

a redefinition

a rebuilding

every time.

‘Do not mourn or weep.

Do not grieve,

for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Amen.