

Getting Off Dead Center

Nehemiah 2:11-20 and Mark 1:35-39

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Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Douglas J. Brouwer

We are engaged in a fall sermon series on the Book of Nehemiah, and I have been choosing New Testament readings to go along with our readings from Nehemiah, either to illuminate what the Old Testament is saying, or to show how a biblical character like Nehemiah anticipates or points us forward to Jesus.

Jesus wasn't like Nehemiah in every way, of course, and I don't mean to suggest that they are clones, but there are similarities that are intentional and that we need to pay attention to.

In several important ways, Nehemiah anticipates the work of Christ. I'm thinking, for example, of the essential qualities of leadership, the humility, the inner strength in the face of criticism and opposition.

Here, in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus is taking time, by himself, to pray. He has gone off, and he has not so much as left a note as to where the disciples can find him.

Which, as we are going to hear, causes quite a lot of concern among the disciples, who always seem just on the verge of panic.

That's how they are presented throughout the gospel stories.

Remember, this the very beginning of Jesus' work, the group has not yet come together, so there is a great deal to do, and yet – this is what I want you to see – Jesus is taking time ... to pray, to be quiet, to find himself in alignment with the will and purpose of God.

It's extraordinary ... as we'll see when we dig further into the Nehemiah story.

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Well, Nehemiah has finally arrived at Jerusalem. He has travelled the 800 miles – almost 1300 kilometers – between the Persian capital and Jerusalem. He has his letters from the Persian king, Artaxerxes, authorizing him to rebuild the wall of the city. He has the timber or lumber he will need for replacing some gates which were burned by the Babylonian army 70 years before.

Nehemiah has finally arrived at the moment for which he has risked ... everything. Remember that he gave up quite a good job in the palace as an advisor to the king. Remember that he had asked for a transfer, so to speak, to one of the least attractive cities in the Persian empire.

We may have idealized images of Jerusalem, but in the fifth century BC when Nehemiah first laid eyes on the city, it was nothing to write home about. It was nothing like the way Nehemiah's parents and grandparents had remembered it. There was a great deal of work to be done.

So, what does Nehemiah do?

This is so striking and so unexpected that I want us to think about it for a moment.

This may well be the biggest moment of Nehemiah's life. Remember that he had emptied out his pension plan and gambled everything – “gambling” may not be quite the right word, but you know what I mean – he had gambled everything of worldly value on this project that lay in front of him. And what does he do?

Verse 11 seems to say that he did nothing for three days.

(By the way, you may want to think about another three-day period in the New Testament, during which the world waited in eager anticipation, Friday afternoon to Sunday morning. This three-day period becomes quite important later on.)

Last week, as I prepared for today, I thought about those times in my life when I started a new position.

At the last church I served, my first official day was Easter, with three very full services on that morning, beginning with a sunrise service outdoors in a lovely park, and as you can imagine, I spent days before my start getting ready, making sure that was the best Easter sermon I was capable of preaching.

In another church I arrived in the office almost a week ahead of the official start date to get all of my books carefully arranged on the shelves and then to meet individually with each member of the staff, so that when the official start date came around, I could hit the ground running.

In fact, I proudly announced all of that to my new church on my first Sunday, as if to say, **“Aren’t you all impressed with all diligent I am, and how eager to get started?”** If they were, they never said so.

What if, on my first day here at IPC, I had tossed my two or three boxes of books into the office and then announced, **“I’m off to the Benedictine retreat center for a few days of prayer and contemplation. I’ll see you later in the week.”**

I could be wrong, but I think you would have been astonished. Maybe you would have been impressed or pleased, but mainly I think you would have been puzzled.

That’s not what we expect from leaders. We expect them to take charge...right away. We expect them to prove themselves to us.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, I do not have a business degree and I have never taken management classes, but I like to read. And I remember reading a story one time about new corporate leader. And on his first day, according to the story, he took a bucket of black paint out to the parking lot, and in the full of everyone watching from the windows of the office building, he painted out the yellow stripes of all the reserved parking spaces.

And the message was, **“If you are that important to this company, you should be first one here in the morning.”** After reading that, I never asked again for a reserved parking space. Message received.

One more story about that.

I remember reading one time a biography of Lord Mountbatten, who was a British naval officer – Admiral of the Fleet at one time – and also the uncle of Prince Charles. And of all the interesting information I learned about Lord Mountbatten in that book, the one story that has stayed with me all these years is that, before assuming command of a ship, Lord Mountbatten would learn the names – think about this – of each and every sailor on board that ship.

He was a well-loved naval officer, and one of the reasons, not surprisingly, is that he knew the name of every sailor on the first day of command.

As soon as I read that, I thought, **“I should be doing that, what a great idea”** and I have tried over the years, but I am no Lord Mountbatten.

Here’s what I want to say about all of that: the first days, even the first hours, in a new position, are critically important. They set the tone and the expectation for everything else that is to follow.

And so what does Nehemiah do?

He does nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. Charles Swindoll, whose book I am using as a guide to understanding Nehemiah, says that before there can be **“meaningful activity,”** there must always be **“meaningful solitude.”**

I wonder, especially for those of you have leadership positions, for those who of you are moms and dads and grandparents and Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders and so on, I wonder if you have taken time to cultivate an inner life.

Successful leaders, Swindoll says, know how to be alone, how to spend time alone, how to think and pray and simply be by themselves.

It was a famous American basketball coach, of all people, who once said, **“Character is what you are when no one is looking.”**

When you are alone, what do you do? Where does your mind go? What kinds of things do you think about?

I am serious about asking these questions – not to make you feel uncomfortable, although maybe more of us should feel uncomfortable – I ask these questions because Nehemiah demonstrates this important quality or trait which later shows up in Jesus of Nazareth – namely, that leaders are people who lead from the inside out.

And if you’ve never heard that expression before, it would be an important one to learn.

All of us, leaders or not, live our lives from the inside out. Whatever we cultivate inside, whatever we spend time thinking about when we are alone, is eventually what shows up outside. You may be able to fake a rich interior life for a while, but eventually – in the tough moments, especially, moments of crisis – what’s on the inside will become obvious for all to see.

All of us – young and old – live our lives from the inside out. And Nehemiah – later Jesus himself – demonstrated that for us.

I want to move along here because there is at least one more critically important point to see in this story. After spending time alone, and after inspecting the walls of the city at night, not in full view of the local population, Nehemiah formulated his plan. This was a deliberate man. If you look up the word “deliberate” in the dictionary, a picture of Nehemiah should be right there.

In fact, there’s a word here in the story I want you to see and remember. Two times in verses 13 to 15, Nehemiah says that he “inspected” the wall. Well, in English the word “inspect” does not carry much weight, but the Hebrew word used here suggests that Nehemiah was looking at it very carefully. There’s even a medical connotation to the word, as if Nehemiah is a physician feeling the glands to find out if they are swollen, if there is an infection to worry about. He is that close!

Before we hear anything about a plan of action, this leader knew the situation better than anyone else, or at least as well anyone in that city.

And it's at this point – at long last – that Nehemiah is ready to go public. So, he finally stands in front of the city council, and he makes his case.

Remember that a couple of weeks ago, I jokingly said that Nehemiah showed up wearing fancy clothes and expensive shoes and having a sophisticated Persian accent. I don't actually know if he wore fancy clothes and expensive shoes, and I don't actually know if he spoke with an accent.

But the point is, he needed to make the sales pitch of his life. Ethnically he may have been one of them, but in every other way he must have seemed to them an outsider.

Remember that when the Babylonian army dragged everyone off into exile 70 years before this, they left behind the poor and the elderly and the disabled, anyone who would be of no use to them. So, those were the people who were left in the land to fend for themselves. And reading between the lines, you sense that the city, already ruined, fell into further disrepair.

And now, here, standing before them, was someone who had lived his entire life surrounded by wealth and all of the finer things in life. Ask yourself, Would you have trusted this man? Would you have been happy to see him? Would you have been ready to volunteer for the back-breaking work of rebuilding a city wall?

I can't say that the people Nehemiah faced were hostile, but put it this way: convincing them to get on board was going to be a tall order.

And guess what? He did it.

Listen again to verse 17: **“You see the bad situation that we are in,”** Nehemiah says, **“that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach.”**

There are two reasons that Nehemiah succeeded in this situation – three, if you remember that God was with him – but two reasons that his approach was just right, and two reasons we could learn to use in our own lives and experiences.

The first was honesty. The city was desolate. Anyone could see that, of course, but Nehemiah had the courage to say it, to name it, to identify what the problem was. He didn't blame anyone, he didn't ask them what in the world they had been doing for the last 70 years, he didn't shame them by suggesting maybe they liked things this way. He simply and courageously said what was true.

“This is a bad situation we are in.”

And that leads me to the second reason Nehemiah was successful. Did you hear the pronoun that Nehemiah used? It was “we.” “Us.”

Three times in just a couple of sentences Nehemiah puts everyone together on the same level. We, us, our. Come, let us rebuild the wall. We are in this together.

One further point here. There basically two ways to motivate people. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivations.

Extrinsic motivations are bonuses and vacations and promotions. So, one way to get someone to work hard and meet the goal is to reward that person with those things. Nehemiah could have said, **“If you help me do this, I will pay you all handsomely.”**

He didn't do that, obviously, and maybe he was not in a position to do it, we don't know. But in any case the motivation Nehemiah used was intrinsic motivation. Studies show that bonuses and vacations and promotions work to a certain degree, but always, always, the best way to get someone to do something is to appeal to something deeper. A sense of pride, maybe. A sense of patriotism.

I have spent most of my adult life – all of my adult life! – working in a church setting. And one of the delights of my life has been working with people who have this intrinsic motivation.

Of course we liked to be paid. And of course we liked our vacations. But on every church staff I have ever been a part of, there has been something else. And it's wonderful. We did what we did because we believed in it. We always saw ourselves as part of something big, a cause bigger than ourselves.

It was kingdom work. We were building God's kingdom on earth, one coffee hour, one pastoral visit, one choir practice, at a time. Sometimes we needed to be reminded of that. Sometimes I needed to remind myself of that.

But most of the time – this is astonishing – that belief was what kept us going.

Look, rebuilding the wall was important. Sort of. But there was something more than a wall at stake for Nehemiah. He was building a people of God. He was building a home for God and for God's people. Nehemiah would later become governor, and it was this vision that gave him his satisfaction and motivation and purpose. The wall was secondary.

Tell me, and I ask you this in all seriousness, what wall are you working on, and why are you doing it?

If you are serving coffee at coffee hour, if you are helping to collate and fold the worship bulletins on Thursday afternoon in the church office, if you are opening your home to a home group during week, what is it that you are doing or building?

These jobs don't pay very well, as you may have noticed, so what do you think you're building?

We are all working together, aren't we, on a much larger project ... let's call it the kingdom of God.

A brick here and a brick there may not seem like much, but together we are building a city where God might come and live, where God's people will find peace and rest and wholeness, where broken lives might be made whole, where dashed hopes eventually become new dreams.

We all have a part or a role to play, and sometimes that role you are playing may seem small and insignificant, but I want you to know that it's very, very important, that with every brick you lay, you are building the kingdom of God. And that's no small thing.

Let's pray...