

Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure
Nehemiah 4:10-23 and Philippians 4:6-7
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Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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This fall we are making our way, ever so slowly, through the Book of Nehemiah, a book of the Bible which I have come to like very much. I'm not sure why I neglected it for so long.

The story, as some of you know, begins in the Persian Empire, in the 5th century BC, with a man named Nehemiah. He is not Persian, he is a Jew, and even though he has never been to his homeland, his Heimat, he nevertheless feels God's call to go there.

Which is curious because, as we've seen, he has quite a good job, working as an advisor to the King of the Persian Empire. You can't rise higher in government or anywhere else, for that matter.

People typically don't just walk away from jobs like that.

On the other hand, people who feel God's call in their lives often do unexpected things – like quitting their jobs and taking on thankless tasks like, um, re-building the walls of a ruined city ... for no salary.

So, Nehemiah returned to his homeland, a place he had never visited, but a place he must have heard about from parents and grandparents, and he began the difficult work of rebuilding the city wall of Jerusalem.

The Book of Nehemiah, as I've mentioned, resembles a political memoir as much as anything, and it has some wonderful lessons to teach us, as I hope you have noticed by now.

Last week, for example, we talked about criticism, the inevitability of criticism, the sting of being criticized, and finally how to receive criticism in a healthy, constructive way. It's not always possible to do that, but sometimes it is.

This week, we turn to the topic of discouragement, which is almost as difficult to talk about as criticism. No one, I'm afraid, is immune to discouragement. I don't care how strong your faith is. It's a nearly universal feeling. And even the apostle Paul, who endured more hardships than any human being should ever have to endure, undoubtedly had his moments.

But the reading today, from his Letter to the Philippians, certainly warns us against discouragement, and feeling anxious, losing heart, wanting to give up. Listen to these words from chapter 4, and then we will talk together about how to do this, how to live with times (or whole seasons) of discouragement:

⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Every new project or every new venture that I have ever been a part of has had a similar kind of trajectory. Always at the beginning there is great excitement. And if people are not excited at the beginning, that would be a warning not to go any further.

But, typically, there is great excitement and enthusiasm at the beginning. Smiles all around. Everyone involved is convinced that it's the best idea ever conceived. People are proud to have their names associated with it.

And then, not all at once, but inevitably the enthusiasm fades. You can't maintain such a high level of excitement for very long, so smiles slowly go away, but people are still working hard.

And then, obstacles arise. I don't know how else to say it. There are always unexpected setbacks, delays that no one anticipated, a change of weather, maybe. It's impossible to plan for every possible contingency, so spirits start to sag a bit.

And when spirits sag, there is always some blaming to do. It's easy to blame the weather, but human beings, as I think you know, like to blame each other. They like to point fingers.

So, there are scapegoats, people who didn't do their jobs, people who weren't qualified and somehow got trusted with too much responsibility.

And when the blaming starts, suddenly people are stepping back, and they're not sure anymore that they want to have their name mentioned in connection with the project.

People will say, **"I was just an informal advisor at an early stage. I don't have anything to do with it!"**

And then – I won't drag this out because I think you know how this goes – occasionally, not always, but occasionally projects are completed, miraculously, with everyone breathing a sigh of relief at the end ... and no one wanting to be involved with a project like that ever again.

I served a church one time that started a major building program, costing millions of U.S. dollars. And I was young and had never been through a building campaign before. But I was convinced it was right thing to do, that God was in it, and so I threw myself into it.

And just about everyone was in favor of it. I don't think there was a single no vote ... at the beginning. Which would be remarkable for any church. Think about it. Not a single no vote.

And I remember that, before we started, we promised the congregation no debt. When it was over, we said, there will be no burdensome loan that we would have to carry around for years and years and that will cripple the operating budget.

So, off we went, and it was thrilling to see this new building take shape. I was as proud and excited as I have ever been in my ministry. But there was a problem, along the way, a setback. We had a sizeable gap between what the project was going to cost and what people had pledged to give.

And I think that was when I first had trouble sleeping through the night. **“God, how could you have led us into this?”** I forget exactly what I prayed, but blaming God was probably a part of it, as it always is.

“This was your idea, Lord, so ... where are you?”

Our campaign consultant kept saying to us that there is always a surprise gift, one that always appears unexpectedly. Don't worry, he said. Have faith. God is good. It was my job to say those things, but I was struggling. And so, there were moments when the campaign consultant was the acting pastor.

To be honest with you, I did not have much in common with Nehemiah, and I could sense that panic was setting in. And it was then – you probably know how this is going to turn out – a gift came in.

Not a pledge, either, a promise of a gift, but cash. From the member of the congregation who looked least able to give any kind of a gift. I think he owned two shirts. He certainly owned no real estate. He lived frugally. Everyone assumed that he had nothing.

But he and his late wife had no children, and during their lives they saved and saved and saved, and it was their hope and dream to give this money, which they had saved all their lives, to their church so that it could continue its ministry ... and would we accept, he wondered, what turned out to be the second largest gift of the entire campaign.

He died before the building was completed, and we named the building after him and his wife.

But I will never, as long as I live, I will never forget the panic and the sleepless nights and the discouragement that I felt through most of that campaign. I know that my faith wasn't strong, I know that I should have been a more positive, hopeful leader, but I had never felt pressure like that before.

What happens when we are faced with something so difficult, the likes of which we have never had to face before?

If you feel nothing in that situation, no anxiety, no discouragement, no panic, then you must be an alien life form. There are times in our lives when even the strongest faith is tested, that's what scripture tells us. Even when we are certain that we are in alignment with God's will, there are going to be times when we want to give in to fear and desperation.

That's the story you heard today from Nehemiah, chapter 4. The workers Nehemiah had assembled, the ones who so enthusiastically signed on to help with the re-building of the walls, were suddenly in a panic.

The story says that the worksite was a mess. The piles of rubbish were as high as the wall. There was a sense of disorder everywhere, the kind I feel after a move when there are boxes everywhere, and when everything seems to be in chaos.

But their problem was bigger than a messy worksite. Their lives were in danger. When Nehemiah dismissed his critics (this was in last week's reading), those critics became enraged, and they threatened the lives of the workers.

I have never been in a leadership situation where the lives of my people were threatened, and I hope I never have to face that, but that was the situation Nehemiah was in. His people wanted to quit. They had had enough. They were starting to question the wisdom of this man from Persia. They were tired, their self-confidence was gone, and they were afraid for their lives.

I want to talk with you for a few minutes about some strategies for coping with discouragement, ways of not losing heart when the going get rough. And I offer these strategies, knowing that there is no easy way, no miracle deliverance.

What I love about Nehemiah is that he always balanced faith and action. He trusted in God – more than I sometimes do – but he also acted.

There is a temptation among Christian people to take a step back and wait for God's miracle cure. He promised deliverance, so we step back and wait for it to happen. But Nehemiah teaches us that we are usually part of God's deliverance plan. We need to participate in our deliverance. The miracle cure happens when we are involved.

Maybe I should list that as the number one strategy for dealing with discouragement.

Trust God ... and work as hard as you have ever worked before.

The next insight the story gives us is that Nehemiah stopped the work on the wall and did a little reorganization. So, sometimes the very best thing to do when you are discouraged is to take some time off and re-group, step back and re-assess the situation. Ask yourself, **“Is the situation really as bleak as it appears right now?”**

That's what Nehemiah did.

Charles Swindoll, on whose book this sermon series is based, the book is called *Hand Me Another Brick*, Charles Swindoll says that **“workaholics make poor workers and worse leaders,”** so Nehemiah stopped the work on the wall and he asked everyone to re-focus.

So, number two, this is the second strategy I want to recommend to you, step back, take a deep breath, and look at your situation again.

Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is one definition of insanity. I was going to say that that's not a biblical truth, but isn't that what this story implies?

Take a break, re-organize, and begin again.

Here's number three. Pray.

You won't be surprised to learn that Nehemiah once again took time to pray. As you've heard me say before, Nehemiah prayed All. The. Time. And this situation of discouragement was no different. He didn't know another way. Time after time after time, Nehemiah took time to pray.

Remember Paul's words, the ones I read from his Letter to the Philippians: **"...in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."**

In these prayers, I don't recommend blaming God for the situation you are in, but (as I mentioned) sometimes that is inevitable. We feel as though someone is to be blame, and God is usually the easiest one to blame. And so, our prayers become times of self-pity. **"God, how could you do this to me?"**

Maybe a better theme for your prayer would be to call to mind what God has done in the past. That's what Nehemiah did. He said to the people **"remember the Lord,"** which is a short-hand way of saying, **"Do a mental review of all the ways God has blessed you, guided you, provided for you, and protected you."**

Sometimes there is no better prayer than the one in which we remember what God has done in the past. It's a lot harder, then, in that moment to blame him for the present. Remember what God has done for you.

Write it out, if that helps. Make a list. Keep a journal. You will be amazed.

Here's number four, a fourth strategy for dealing with discouragement.

One of the problems that Nehemiah and his people had was that they were listening to the nay-sayers. They would listen to the complainers and to the critics, and inevitably they would feel discouraged. It's like a contagious disease, it affects everyone it touches.

In your own life, maybe it's time to spend less time with people who never have a positive word to say. Their negativity just gets us down. Being around them makes us feel sad and depressed.

I have known people like this in my life. And I think I listen to them at the beginning because it seems like a caring thing to do, so I absorb all of their negativity and hopelessness and sometimes anger. And at some point, I can't wait to get out of there. I want to run as fast as I can. I feel like taking a shower afterwards.

I'm not saying that you should stop being friends with these people, they may need you, but in moments of discouragement they are often more than we can handle. Being with them at a tough time can send us in a downward spiral, and that's not a good plan.

If you are living through a season of discouragement right now, make sure your friends are people who are generally positive about life and who build up rather than drag down.

Here's number five, a fifth strategy for dealing with discouragement. Stop comparing yourself to others.

One way guaranteed way to send you into a downward spiral from which you may have a difficult time recovering is to compare yourself to other people. Did you see the wall that those other people built around their city. It's really a great wall, far better than the wall we're building here.

They have more workers, thousands more, their building materials were so far superior to what we're using here. The wall we're building will never look as good as the wall around that other city.

Do you know something? You can always find a better looking wall. You can always find a better team of workers. Someone in the world will always have a better situation than the one you are in.

So, what is there to do? Stop it. Stop comparing your situation to the situation of another person.

All my life I have known people who were smarter, better looking, had more money, went to better schools, had better jobs, had healthier families, took more fabulous vacations, and on and on and on.

Those comparisons have never made me happy and less discouraged. The only cure for these comparisons is to stop looking around and to start looking at what you have, what God has given to you.

Was the wall around Jerusalem the prettiest, most secure wall that was ever built? I don't know. Probably not. Does it matter? Do those things ever matter?

Remember what I said a couple of weeks ago. Nehemiah was building more than a wall. I know that he came to build a wall, but in the process of building a wall, God's larger plan was being revealed.

God had sent Nehemiah to build a people of God, a new nation, one that would finally be faithful to their God.

The wall was a small step on the path to being a faithful people once again.

So, here's what I would say. Don't get caught up in your wall. Remember the big picture. God – and this is the story of scripture from beginning to end – God is preparing a future for us, and it will be better, grander, more wonderful than anything we can imagine right now.

Let us pray...