

Nehemiah 2:11-20 (NRSV)

¹¹So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. ¹²Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. ¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." ¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. ¹⁹But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us,

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

In our Bibles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are placed right after 1 and 2 Chronicles, for all four books tell one long story: the story of Israel, from Adam (the first person in the lengthy genealogies that begin Chronicles) to the exiles' return from Babylon and the rebuilding of their covenantal life in Israel. The books end the story in about 430BC.

But the four books are not really four books at all. 1 and 2 Chronicles are merely two halves of a single book, Chronicles. Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah are two halves of a single work. And it's likely that all of it was compiled and written by a single author or a single writing team. The author pulled together a variety of materials in compiling the work: royal decrees, various lists, letters, and first person narratives from Ezra and Nehemiah themselves. For example, most of Ezra-Nehemiah is written in Hebrew, but some is in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the day, as the book's author simply copied in some official Aramaic documents.

Not only does Ezra-Nehemiah preserve important history from the century after the return from exile began in 539BC, the books teach that the return was God's doing. God moved Cyrus to order the Jews return to Jerusalem. God used Darius the Great to order the rebuilding of the temple. And God used Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. A good question to consider is whether and how God uses world powers today to further his purposes. It is always tempting to see much of the Old Testament as completely foreign to our own experiences and even to the way God works in the world. But perhaps, we need to learn to see that God still works in surprising ways today.

saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

Rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem was much more than just a construction project. Like the rebuilding of the temple, the work expressed the hope of the returning exiles to again be the unified people of God.

People are builders and always have been. Not long after Noah and the flood, the humans began building a great tower that would reach upward to the heavens (Genesis 11). This tower would enable them to climb into the sky with the god, symbolizing their determination to be like gods themselves.

When God revealed himself to Moses and gave Israel the Law at Mt. Sinai, God also gave them instructions to build a home for God, a holy place in which God would dwell with them (see Exodus 25). This tabernacle, a moveable tent, was the home for the ark of the covenant, but it also symbolized the Israelites' covenantal life with God.

Hundreds of years later, God told his people that the time had come to build him a proper home, a temple of marble and gold, in Jerusalem. And the Israelites poured everything they had into it (see 1 Chronicles 29). They understood the significance of transforming the tabernacle into a permanent home for God.

The walls of Jerusalem

God uses the most surprising people to accomplish God's purposes. When Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem in 587/6 BC, he not only tore down the city walls, he destroyed the temple. The walls symbolized Jerusalem's political independence; the temple was the center of the conquered Israelites' religious life. When tens of thousands of Jews went off into exile, a burning hulk of a dead city was left, populated only by the poor and least educated.

Yet, about five decades later, in 539BC, King Cyrus of Persia, who had conquered the Babylonians, issued a decree that the Jewish exiles be allowed to begin returning home. For the biblical writers, Cyrus's decree was not a lucky turn for the Jews. Rather, it was God using Cyrus to send God's people home.

But God wasn't done there. When the people began to rebuild the temple, their work aroused suspicion, anger, and opposition from their neighbors. The "enemies" of Judah understood quite well what the rebuilding of the temple would mean. Yet, Darius, the Persian king at the time, eventually gave orders that the temple project must be allowed to proceed (520BC; see Ezra 5-6).

Hearing God

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't tell anyone about his mission. But he's got one and he's confident that God is behind it: "I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem."

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I'm sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? And the visions of the prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God, back to God's way and a life lived before God.

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that, frankly, I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the OT prophets, such as Isaiah's commissioning in Isaiah 6. I've never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah's heart.

This story helps us to see that perhaps God doesn't really speak so differently now than he did in the Old Testament. It's a mistake to read the Old Testament depictions of people's experiences and see them as completely foreign to our own. Abraham heard God. Moses heard God. Nehemiah heard God. You and I can hear God too.

Which brings us to Nehemiah, who went to the Persian king at the time (444BC), Artaxerxes, and asked permission to return to Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the city walls. In a move that again angered the Jew's neighbors, Artaxerxes, not only gave the ok, he ordered that help be provided to the project.

If you read today's Scripture passage closely you'll see that Nehemiah wants to rebuild the city wall so that the people will "no longer suffer disgrace" (2:17). After all, how could the city that God had chosen be left in ruins? City walls were enormously important in the ancient world, in that they kept prospective conquerors out or at least forced them into maintaining a lengthy siege. It was the custom that when a king visited a city, he would be met outside the city walls by a delegation and then escorted through the city walls and into the city.¹

Given all that, it isn't surprising that some saw Nehemiah's rebuilding work as signifying Jewish independence from the Persian king. He was even accused of plotting a revolt. That, of course, wasn't what Nehemiah had in mind. He simply wanted to restore Jerusalem to a city suitable as the home for God's temple. So he prayed for strength and resolve.

The campus of St. Andrew

Jerusalem needed city walls for protection. We at St. Andrew build because we need a place to worship, to learn, and to meet. To meet our growing needs, we will reconfigure some of the space we have and then build more.

But, like Jerusalem's city wall, our campus also symbolizes dreams and hopes. It is a

¹This was exactly what the crowds did with Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

statement about what we think matters. Though many churches are built without them now, I like that St. Andrew has a 175' steeple, beckoning the world to this place and to the risen Christ. The attention paid on our campus to the beauty of our natural surroundings proclaims our confidence that such beauty and order bears the fingerprints of God. The amazing diversity of the children's classrooms speaks to our on-going commitment to dynamic, Christ-centered ministries for all. As in all else that we do, when we build, we strive to be the people that God has called us to be and to do the job he has set before us.

Rev. Michael Reeves on What's Next

Last year on a Saturday the south wall of our church educational wing collapsed. The good news was that no one was injured, but the collapse was significant – we had noticed some buckling and had attempted to get a the builder out to check on it, but before we got him here, it collapsed. Then a week later, again on Saturday, another, larger part of the wall collapsed, crushing several air conditioners. Inspectors assured us that the overall structure was safe but additional parts of the wall had buckled and more might fall – so we began to investigate a rebuilding. It was a long and sad and very frustrating story – the wall was 16 years old and was no longer in warranty. Apparently some construction short cuts had been taken and over time the collapse was inevitable. The builder accepted no responsibility. Our insurance company said that they were only liable for the stuff crushed by the wall and not the repair to the wall. Our legal counsel said that recovery of funds for the damage would be expensive, take a long time, and not very likely to succeed. Meanwhile the wall was still on the ground. Trying to get contractors out proved to be difficult as well; for months we could not get anyone to give us a bid for the repairs. Eventually we got that settled and it took weeks to order the right color bricks. And after the repairs started, the mortar was the wrong color, causing yet another delay. For almost a year, our south wall was covered by weathered tar paper. If you look today you can see that the repairs have been almost completed. What an agonizing and trying experience!

In the first six chapters of Nehemiah the walls of Jerusalem were finally rebuilt after lying in ruin for 140 years. After returning to Jerusalem and surveying the project, Nehemiah called for the cooperation of the leaders and began to rebuild the walls. There was opposition to his efforts including attacks on his confidence as well as his competence. But despite all obstacles the wall was completed.

In a real sense St Andrew has built many walls. Look around, the completion of the sanctuary has been a testimony to God's presence through the community. When community groups use our facilities, when the symphony or schools meet here, it is a testimony to our Lord. At Easter and again at Christmas we have hundreds of visitors who see the handiwork of God when they visit here.

The next step for us in some ways is the same – a challenge to continue to provide the space needed for new people who come every week. The difference this time is that we want to pay for it as we build it and reduce our mortgage at the same time. This is a daunting challenge with obstacles along the way, but United we can do this. Together we are unlimited in what we can accomplish.

This week you will have the opportunity to respond and be a part of what God is doing here – not just an observer – a real participant.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, APRIL 27 – MAY 3

The readings for this week will take you through the story of Nehemiah. A study Bible will provide you with some additional background. You might try reading these passages from Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*. The outline here is from Ralph Klein's commentary.

Monday, Nehemiah 1:1 – 3:32 Nehemiah prays for help and returns to Jerusalem to begin work.

Tuesday, Nehemiah 4:1 – 5:19 Providing for the defense of the city and dealing with internal threats

Wednesday, Nehemiah 6:1 – 7:73a The wall is completed.

Thursday, Nehemiah 7:73b – 9:37 Ezra reads the Law and the people share a great day of repentance.

Friday, Nehemiah 9:38-10:39 The people make a firm agreement to keep the Law.

Saturday, Nehemiah 11:1 – 13:31 The climax of Nehemiah's work and related matters

Sermon Notes

Get the Monkey Off Your Back: Making Sense of Creation and Evolution

The current *Something Else* series on Sunday mornings

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.

Today: Guest Speaker Next week: NO CLASS

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Nehemiah took a lot of risks in returning to Jerusalem and leading the rebuilding project. Anytime we undertake a large and important project, such as our next building program, we take risks. What does risk-taking really have to do with being a Christian, with being a genuine disciple? How does risk-taking help us to become more trusting and faithful?
2. You might begin this week by making a list of risks that you think God might expect Christians to take. What are some? What do we risk? What do we not risk as we seek to be genuine disciples? If you have trouble coming up with a list, consider whether we might be blinded to some of the risks. If you think that being Christian is about no more than being happy and being nice, then it might be hard to see much risk in it. Yet, the Bible is replete with stories of people who had to take big risks if they were to stay true to God. Just remember Nehemiah going to the king or Daniel in the lions' den. We are not going to be asked to climb into a den of lions, but still, how can we go about learning how better to discern the risks that God hopes we will take?
3. Visitors come to St. Andrew on a variety of occasions and all over the campus. What do you think that our buildings convey to them about our plans and hopes? What would you like to see conveyed? How can we go about helping to ensure that our plans for the new building program are consistent with the vision that we laid out last year?