“The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength”
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Nehemiah 8:1-12

Before we get started today, I just want to say how grateful I am that our chapel community follows the common lectionary with regard to our scripture readings each Sunday. This is a first for me - to follow this tradition. And it forces me, holds all of us accountable, to study scripture that we might otherwise avoid. What a treasure we have this morning in the book of Nehemiah. The message is truly a hidden gem.

Let me give a brief overview so you can get a feel for the context of chapter 8 that was read for us this morning. The book of Nehemiah is the last of the historical books of the Old Testament. It was written around 445 BC. Over a hundred years before its writing, Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon. Nehemiah records the third group of Jewish people to return to Jerusalem after captivity. There are two main characters to know about: 1. Ezra, who was a priest and a scribe - religious leader, very well educated, and 2. Nehemiah, who was governor. The primary focus of today's message will be on Nehemiah.

The most pressing issue facing the Jewish people at this time was that the walls of the city were not yet repaired from when Jerusalem was destroyed and that left them defenseless and vulnerable. Kind of like having no border protection. And the walls were also needed to protect the temple from attack so there could be a continuity of worship.

I remember when I was deployed to Iraq. The first month we were there, we worshipped in a tent. That worked out okay until we became targets for incoming mortars and rocket attacks. Moving to a hardened structure didn't guarantee our safety, but it did afford us the opportunity to focus more fully on worship. Same thing for the Jewish people.

So Nehemiah hears about this concern in Jerusalem, and after much prayer -key point here- after much prayer, he convinces the king to let him go to back to Jerusalem and mobilize the people to get the walls rebuilt. As many of you know, unfortunately, good intentions do not always follow a straight path. Scripture tells us that Nehemiah encountered obstacles throughout the whole process. In modern language, he was dealing with government bureaucracy and political maneuverings. People were prideful and their jealousy rose up against those who were responding to God's vision under Nehemiah's leadership. Many were saying that following God meant he was being unfaithful to the king. They were accusing them of divided loyalties. They kept pinging, chipping away at those who responded to God's vision until they were discouraged.

Shortly after I began in ministry in central Illinois, there was a severe thunderstorm. I had a great view of one of the largest churches in town which had a very tall steeple and I noticed that the lightning kept striking the steeple. I was concerned that there would be a fire. I asked an electrician if this would be a problem and he explained it was grounded and would not be an issue. In that moment, God spoke to me. He said, "When you stand up for me, you will be attacked. But if you are grounded in me and my word, you will be protected."

This is why it is so important for us to pray for our leaders. Because leaders are targets. We need to pray that God would give our leaders strength to stand against personal attacks and temptations. Nehemiah
was a leader and he was fiercely attacked, but because he was grounded in God and his vision, he refused to give in to fear or to run away.

Remember, Nehemiah wasn't an official religious leader. He was motivated by his relationship with God and he devoted his life to doing God's work in the secular world. God uses each one of us—our talents, our experiences and training to prepare us for his work. And usually, we have no idea where he's leading us, but he knows and it's better than we can possibly imagine. Not that living for him is without challenges, as Nehemiah has proven to us today, but what seemingly impossible things we can accomplish when we listen for God's vision for our lives and devote ourselves to his work.

Nehemiah persevered and the walls around Jerusalem were built in 52 days. Think about how long it takes anything to happen in government and we realize this building of walls could only happen in this brief amount of time through the power of God.

So the walls were built and then scripture says (Nehemiah 6:16) "When all our enemies heard about this (the completion of the walls in record time), all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God."

All this leads up to our passage today in chapter 8 and lest you worry I'm just getting started, remember God says “fear not..."

So Nehemiah and the people of God rebuilt the walls around Jerusalem in just a short time, but Nehemiah's greatest work is bringing the Jewish people to a spiritual awakening. The Jewish people had been exiled for a number of years and didn't hear the word of God for some time. The walls were finally built, they were protected and Ezra, the actual priest, read the law. The people were so famished for God's word and didn't even know it. Kind of like when your whole body aches, your head aches, and you’re dehydrated and don't even know it. Ezra read the law, known to us as the first five books of the Bible for six hours. The people were so moved that they cried when they recognized how far they had moved away from God. God had done so much for them, releasing them from captivity and bondage and they basically spit in his face. They were so grieved by their sin that all they could do was mourn.

Let us hear see words again in verses 9-12:
9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

10 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.”

11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.
12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Nehemiah didn't set out to be a hero because he got the walls built in record time. The first couple of chapters in this book make it very clear that he spent time with God, listening for HIS vision, knowing that whatever God wanted to accomplish in his life would happen only through prayer combined with hard work and perseverance. In order to lead others, and we are all leaders, no matter our station, we need to listen to God's direction for our own lives.
My hypothesis- my educated guess- is that God's mission for our lives hasn't changed over the centuries. People are still desperate for God's word- for hope that reveals itself in grace, unconditional love. While his mission hasn't changed, his vision for each one of our lives is unique and valuable. God is in the business of using his people to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, and when we devote ourselves to him in prayer and persevere, amazing things happen. To quote one of my favorite leaders, Winston Churchill, "Never give in--never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; (and here's the best part in my opinion) never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy...."and might I add, because you're on God's team. He's got your back. Amen.

Pastoral prayer
O God, Light of the world, strengthen your servants to continue steadfastly in the teaching of your disciples, in communion with all believers. May we live and labor in one Spirit. Shine through all your people wherever they may be and whatever their calling. Unite us in our various callings that no workplace or social gathering shall be without your spokesperson.

We pray for all who are vested with authority in this and every land, together with their representatives, that there may be justice and peace in our world.

Everlasting God, from whose love nothing can sever us, we pray for the family and loved ones of Army Sgt David J. Chambers who was killed in combat this week. May they experience your ever-present comfort and peace during this time.

(Naval Academy Prayer)
Almighty God, the Fountain of light and wisdom, without whom nothing is strong and nothing is holy; look with favor, we beseech You, upon this Academy. Give Your grace to all those to whom the management of its affairs and the instruction of its members are confided. Grant that all those in places of special authority, trust and responsibility, may discharge their respective duties acceptably unto You. To our Midshipmen, give wisdom and strength, that they may diligently and effectively pursue their studies, confront with courage the challenges of life, and perform their duties faithfully unto You. Let Your hand ever be over them; let Your Holy Spirit ever be with them. We pray these things through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.