

God's Enterprise: Surveying the Landscape

Nehemiah 2:9-20

Introduction – Two Kinds of People

Psychologists tell us there are two kinds of people in this world when it comes to ordering our lives: those who plan and those who are spontaneous. Of course, that's an oversimplification. People are complex. Most of us are a mixture of both. Planners have to schedule flexibility and the spontaneous ones have to do some planning or, as they saying goes, "they plan to fail."

I'm a planner. It might seem like overkill to you, and perhaps it is, but I've got my sermon topics planned out pretty much through next summer. But I've worked for pastors who didn't know what they were going to preach on from week to week and wouldn't tell me until Thursday. Makes it pretty hard to plan a cohesive worship service. I can't quite figure Diane out. When it comes to teaching she wants everything fully planned out and in its place. But she'll change social plans for the family on the spot. Now my son's a planner like me. One of the funniest of our family stories happened several years on vacation in Colorado. We had been talking about going to a lake on a particular day. Well, when the day arrived, Diane woke up and suggested that we go whitewater rafting instead. Now you'd think that everyone would love whitewater rafting. But my son broke down in tears, sobbing uncontrollably. He wasn't against going rafting. He just couldn't handle changing plans on the spot! "You guys keep changing the plans all the time and I just can't take it!" Like I said, some need to plan; others feel constrained by plans and want to be spontaneous.

In the Kingdom of God, there is a place for both. We have a tendency, however, to think that there are certain things that are spiritual and serve the Kingdom and there are other things that we do that are somehow less spiritual. We all know that God works through prayer. But strategic assessment and planning? Where is God in that? Seems like that's just human effort. Wouldn't it be more spiritual just to go by faith and let God direct us as we go? I don't think so. We don't have to make a distinction between what is spiritual and what is not. For Christians, all of life is sacred. Did not Jesus, himself, urge his would-be disciples to plan – to "count the cost" before deciding to follow him? (Luke 14:28)

The story of Nehemiah helps us to understand that God works both through our prayers and through our plans. Our passage today shows that along with being a man of prayer, he was a clever master planner.

The Word – Nehemiah 2:9-20

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the

Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

Prayer

It's been three weeks since we've been with Nehemiah. Perhaps a bit of review is in order. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the most powerful man in the world in his day, King Artaxerxes of Persia. The report that he heard from Jerusalem by his brother threw him into a season of mourning and prayer over their humiliation and disgrace. He spent four months in prayer and reflection. During that time, God began to birth a vision of restoration in his heart. And he prayed that God would grant him favor in the eyes of the king. Nehemiah leveraged his training in court protocol and his high position to secure royal sympathies. As further evidence that God was with him, he was granted not only a leave of absence with letters of authority, the king also provided a royal escort to ensure his safety and reception by his subjects. Our text today opens with his arrival in the province.

Enter the Villains (vs. 9-10)

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the

Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

Every good story has a bad guy, and Nehemiah has two of them along with a third scruffy accomplice. Sanballat, the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite are perfectly cast as villains in this story. There are other historical references to Sanballat outside of the Bible. He was the governor of Samaria – the region directly north of Jerusalem and the former homeland of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Sanballat, and the people that he governed in Samaria, are related to the Jews in Jerusalem. In their own way, they worship Yahweh – the God of the Bible. The conversation that Jesus had with a Samaritan woman in John 4 gives us a good picture of the strained relationship that the Jews had with their northern cousins. Sanballat remains an adversarial presence throughout the story of Nehemiah.

Tobiah, on the other hand, is an Ammonite, a historical enemy of the Jews. He, too, seems to have some political clout as a governor in the region. As the story progresses, he will partner with Sanballat to try and thwart the enterprise in Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Not much is known about Geshem the Arab. He doesn't have the clout of Sanballat and Tobiah. Think of him as a side-kick that the main villains use when it suits their purposes.

When Nehemiah arrived on the scene with his royal letters of authority and military escort, Sanballat and Tobiah were understandably upset. The whole region had been their playground and now this newcomer had come with his fancy letters and bodyguards. The gig was up. The status-quo was threatened. Imagine the fun they've had for all those years. The Jews in Jerusalem had been powerless to stop any raids or mistreatment by the regional governors because the city was unable to defend itself without walls. If Nehemiah had come to seek the welfare of the Jews in Jerusalem, then their power was threatened. No wonder they were upset.

There will always be opposition. Count on it! People don't want their comfort or advantage threatened. Leaders are, by definition, catalysts for change and there will always be folks who resist them. Organizational or systematic change requires personal change and those who are comfortable with the status-quo will put up a stink. It's normal human nature.

When we are engaged in God's enterprise, like Nehemiah was, we need to be aware that the opposition comes not just from human nature, but also from our spiritual enemy – Satan and all his demons. He will always be the enemy of God's work and the only way to defeat him is through prayer and putting on the full armor of God – the godly character that Paul described in Ephesians 6. As we move forward into the future and mobilize to join God in his work, expect obstacles and opposition. The battle is to be humbly embraced as we rely on God's strength. Opposition is no joy to endure, but it will cultivate faith and remind us that what we seek to do is God's work and not ours alone.

Purposeful Delay (vs. 11-12)

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem with his royal entourage, he must have certainly made a big splash. I think if most of us were in Nehemiah's shoes, we would have rallied the people together and told them that we were there to save the day. But Nehemiah does something very unexpected. He does nothing...for three days. For a man of action, Nehemiah does an awful lot of waiting around. For four months, he prayed before he took steps to address the king. Now, when he finally arrives at his destination, he takes time to rest and reflect.

I believe everything that Nehemiah did was purposeful. There is no waste in waiting. Action all the time – 24/7 – 365 days out of the year will lead to burnout and poor decisions. Perhaps he needed rest after his long journey from Persia. Maybe he was networking and finding out who the leaders were. He was probably assessing the spirit of the people.

In the last several months I have reflected on the trajectory of our ministry together here during the last year. Some folks have said we've changed an awful lot of things while others have wondered when we're going to "get off the dime." I believe the time that we've had in the last fifteen months has been a necessary time of healing, stabilization, and assessment. I could have presented a vision and action plan for us a year ago. I love strategic planning. But I am convinced that the right way to move on to God's agenda is to do it together and to do it in his time.. This has been a purposeful time of waiting. But the time to mobilize is now coming upon us.

Covert Reconnaissance (vs. 13-16)

I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

After waiting three days, Nehemiah then cleverly set out on a covert reconnaissance excursion during the night. I've traced his journey on a simple map on the screen for you. The text gives us the details of his survey of the walls and gates. At one point, the ground is so steep and the rubble so deep, he had to go further out from the walls and go up the Kidron Valley. He didn't

encircle the city. Rather, he only surveyed the lower half. Evidently, he saw enough. He returned to the place that he started from.

I marvel at Nehemiah's cleverness and wisdom. It's hard to hold a secret. Do you remember the little phrase from WWII? "Loose lips sink ships." Nehemiah must have had his own version: "A wagging tongue and you're undone." Perhaps he didn't want to divulge his plans until they were fully formed. That makes a lot of sense. Why put out a plan that you haven't fully researched and considered. And then when expectations are not realized, you have lost all the faith and trust that you need to lead. We have our own government foibles to prove that point. I believe another reason that Nehemiah kept his plans to himself was because of the danger of leaking information to the enemies that he encountered upon his arrival in the region. As the story progresses, we will observe the wisdom of his caution.

Going Public (vs. 17-18)

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

After Nehemiah had done his reconnaissance and the plan had developed in his mind and heart he gathered the people together and challenged them. I love what he did. He didn't pull any punches. He told the truth exactly as it was. And then he challenged them to action.

Leaders have to be honest in their assessment of the challenges. People can smell a con job a mile away. Transparency and honesty cultivates the trust necessary for a leader to be effective. But there's more. Nehemiah was confident that the people would rise to his challenge. Honesty and confidence: both are required of the effective leader. Kind of reminds me of Winston Churchill during the beginning days of WWII when England seemed to be facing the Nazi monster by itself:

I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."

We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I

can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.¹

Honesty and confidence: that is what we need in this hour.

I love the people's response! "Let's do it!" And the Scripture says, "...they strengthened their hands for the good work." There was no holding back. They were all in, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and with all their resources. Friends, I don't know exactly where God will lead us in his enterprise here in Aberdeen, but when we begin to mobilize for mission, we'll need "all in." In your prayers. In your action. In your imagination. In your money. We'll need to strengthen our hands for the good work that God has for us.

Opposition Begins (vs. 19)

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

It's at this point, where the people have turned the corner and have decided to do the work that the opposition mobilizes. Predictable. Geshem the Arab joins Sanballat and Tobiah in mocking the Jerusalem builders: "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Their sarcasm, aimed at demoralizing a formerly disgraced people is also a serious threat. Years before, the King of Persia had shut down building in Jerusalem because their enemies reported that they were planning a rebellion. Certainly, everyone in Nehemiah's day knew that history. The trio of scoundrels was not only mocking the people, they were threatening to shut it down with an old strategy of tattling on them to the King.

Nehemiah's Rebuke (vs. 20)

Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

Nehemiah didn't hesitate. His rebuke was quick and direct. He knew the seriousness of the threat and he could not afford flagging morale in his newly enthused work crew. Through months of praying and experiencing miraculous and generous provision through the Persian king, Nehemiah knew that the enterprise was not his but God's. Success was assured and he confidently silenced his opponents. His reply was a strong statement of faith in God. And then he drew "a line in the sand." These guys were probably regular players in Jerusalem, coming and going as they pleased and exerting their negative influence. Whatever influence or power Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem ever had in Jerusalem, it was over. There was no waffling or

¹ Quoted from Charles Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, pp. 58, 59.

negotiation. Nehemiah was decisive. He saw the threat for what it was and took action to cut them off. But, I have to tell you, we haven't seen the last of these bad guys.

There are times in a leader's life when he or she must courageously step up and take decisive action to protect their people. We've seen that here in those difficult days of our turmoil a few years ago. I thank God for the bold men who stood up to the faction that tried to hijack this ministry. They forced the issue which led to the split. But if it hadn't been done, First Baptist Church, as it is today with all of its potential and promise, would not exist. I pray we never have to endure those kinds of internal strife again. But I know there will be times when we'll need to say to those who oppose the work that God will indeed give us success and that they will have no part in it.

Lessons for Today

This is our last message in Nehemiah until January 12. Mark that date down. It is very important. That is the day in which we will convene after the service with a meal and share our ideas and dreams for ministry together. Whatever you do, please make plans to be here on that day. We need everyone: every deacon, every staff member, every teacher, every helper – from the nursery through the young at heart. We need every musician and every technician, every usher and every greeter. If you call First Baptist Church your home, you need to be here. That's what it means to be "all in."

A month ago we were called to a season of prayer and reflection. The story of Nehemiah illustrates that God works through planning as well as prayer. I've called us to prayer. I hope you take that seriously.

- Pray to understand God's heart for our city.
- Pray to discern where we have failed God.
- Search the Scriptures to claim the promises he has for us.
- Reflect on what God has done for us in the past.

But in your praying, engage your eyes and your ears and your imagination. I had lunch with a man from our church this week who is doing just that. His heart is being moved by the needs of people right in our own city. He's been asking around and has made some connections with people who know these needs. He's surveying the landscape, just as Nehemiah did.

Friends, for years our focus has been on our church ministries, the Christian School, and mission endeavors beyond our front door. All of those are worthy causes. But what about the hurting people on our doorstep? Jesus described his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Luke 4:18-19 (ESV)

If that is his mission, then as his disciples, it is ours as well. How are we doing?

In his convicting book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, World Vision President, Richard Stearns observes,

“...we are carriers of the gospel – the good news that was meant to *change* the world. Belief is not enough. Worship is not enough. Personal morality is not enough. And Christian community is not enough. God has always demanded *more*. When we committed ourselves to following Christ, we also committed to living our lives in such a way that a watching world would catch a glimpse of God’s character – His love, justice, mercy – through our words, actions, and behavior.²”

A godly man once put it this way, “Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence, or learning.”³

Friends, God has placed us in Aberdeen. It is time to own our responsibility. It is time to mobilize with work that *demonstrates* the Gospel to the outside world rather than just words we say or sing in this house. I am under no illusions. This will be hard. This will require you and me to get out of our comfort zones. Some won’t like that and will let us know. But know this: I will not ask you to do anything that I am not willing to do myself. I don’t know what that will be and to tell you the truth, I’m a little bit unsettled about it.

But let me tell you: I’m also very excited and confident. I believe that God is with us. We are God’s enterprise and he has work for us to do for his kingdom. It’s not yet time to build. That will come – very soon now. This is a season of prayer, reflection, and surveying the landscape of needs. I know that as you pray that God will open your eyes, he will allow you to see the possibilities of ministry. I believe he will also open our hearts to where we have sinned in the things we have done and not done.

² Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, p. 3.

³ Frederick W. Faber

I feel like I'm a football coach at half-time! Are you feeling it? There is a sense of urgency in this call. Now is the time for all of us to survey the land. Now is the time strengthen our hands for the good work that God has for us. Now is the time for all of us to mobilize for the Kingdom.

Song of Reflection – Open Your Eyes – Keith Green

Prayer – Call to Commitment – I'll pray. I'll survey. I'll commit to be there January 12th.

Closing Song – A New Hallelujah