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SERMON TITLE: The Call to be Brave

Rebuilding a City: Trusting God & Each other

SCRIPTURE: Esther 4:6-17

DATE: May 3, 2020

Online service at www.fpcd.org.

Before you read the sermon, READ Ezra 1:1-7. Online service at www.fpcd.org

Do you think God is involved in the world's troubles? Do you think God oversees nations and cities to help us overcome hardship? Do you think God takes action with a goal to rescue, protect, and rebuild us, even when tragedy hits? Those are the questions of our series "Rebuilding a City: Trusting God and Each Other."

To answer those questions, we are going to study the Book of Nehemiah. Only today we are not going to read Nehemiah yet! First we need to understand the time, context, and the other players whose stories contribute to the rebuilding of one of the world's longest-surviving cities. We will look at the faith and work of people—and how faith in God matters and your work matters. When we believe, when we pray and seek God and then act, we connect with good, life-filled plans that God has for the world, nations, cities, and you!

For faith begins on a personal level. Faith spreads through you to bless others.

We read from Ezra. Ezra was a religious teacher who lived in Susa, Persia. He lived there because Judah had been conquered by Babylon. According to the Bible, this was a consequence of God's people abandoning God. God's people lost faith and turned away from the God of heaven to false gods. Powerful nations began to squeeze in on them and eventually they were conquered by one, and then the next, and the next. Assyria, Babylon, Persia.

The Bible tells us that God allows punishing consequences and hardship, but **God never gives up on you or me**. Harsh circumstances are often part of life. Other times bad things are intentionally imposed to help us turn back to God, just as you would discipline a child to gain a positive outcome.

But God never stopped caring about them, as you will see.

The book of Ezra recounts an edict given by a king to rebuild. This edict greatly superseded the man who issued it. It was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah. Ezra tells us the king was moved by God, whom he didn't even know. There are two important aspects in life to look for: our acts and God's plans, which God fulfills. God would not give up on God's people or God's city—ever.

But first, things seemed to go in the opposite direction. It seemed as if God abandoned God's people. Citizens of Judah were deported from their land in three waves. The final deportation came when Jerusalem, the capital, was destroyed. Their beautiful temple built by Solomon was pillaged and reduced to a heap of rocks. The city wall and gates were demolished, the palaces burned down, and most survivors carried off as captives; a total loss. Where's God? Does God care?

For seventy years the city lay dormant, populated by few people. With little reconstruction and less economy, those who remained languished in poverty.

Could this nation be reborn? How does a city and its people recover?

Along comes a king named Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, the largest ever known at that time, who defeats the enemy Babylonians. The Persian king reversed Babylon's policies and allowed the people of Israel to return to their land. 42,300 did, about the number of Duncanville residents. That first wave tried to rebuild the temple. It was not easy. Opposition and fear ruled. Progress was slow. Leadership was slim.

Then the Lord raised up Ezra. The Lord raised up a king and now a pastor.

Ezra, the patriotic pastor, secured permission to lead the second wave of people back to Israel's capital in 458BC. He set his heart on God's Word and prayer. He felt so moved by God to return that he refused to ask for armed protection because he wanted the king to know his God would actually protect him! So he and the 1,500 families who returned with him fasted so bandits would not ambush them.

Do you ever take a risk on God just to prove your faith is worth it?

God did protect them. He arrived safely and began helping people by strengthening them spiritually. To be God's people we have to know God personally and learn what it means to walk with God by faith. So he taught them as their pastor.

A short twelve years later, Nehemiah would follow with the third and final wave. He was an urban planner whose goal was to rebuild the city. He would later become governor. We will begin his story next week.

An urban planner and a pastor rebuild a city—an unlikely alliance, but God does amazing things when people commit their jobs and lives to him.

Two leaders, each following God's call. Both care about their hometown and heritage so much that they invest themselves in doing something to revive them.

What drives you to invest in your city and your God when times are hard?

I promise you, God willingly invests in you.

A third leader is a young Jewish woman living in Susa. She was selected to be the king's wife when his first wife was suddenly deposed. Esther's husband ruled from India to Ethiopia. She had civil power. Although she never left Susa, her actions tell us something about what it takes to step out in faith when circumstances are chaotic.

Life in exile was hard. Safety was always tenuous. It so happened that a powerful enemy of the Jews initiated an edict to annihilate them. What would they do? Would God help them?

Queen Esther was raised by her relative, Mordecai, a prominent city leader. He kept up with her often. Hathach the eunuch, was Esther's personal attendant. Hear the story. READ Esther 4:6-17

It must have been horrible for Mordecai to see that paper. He had to do something! There are times in life you have to stand up too, and take a risk.

Esther believed in God. To be a believer is to care about the things that God cares about. One thing about God is that God cares about the welfare of people and nations.

Not only are believers to care about the things that God cares about, but believers are actually expected to take action! As James says in the New Testament,

"What good is it if you say you have faith but you don't show it by your actions? . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:14, 17)

Mordecai understood that Esther was in the perfect position to avert this disaster, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to your royal position for just such a time as this." She would need to use her civil power to ensure the safety of her people.

Our jobs and positions in life are not just for ourselves. Tim Keller in *Every Good Endeavor* says your achievements are not simply for you and your need for personal significance. God calls us to grasp a higher vision, a vision that includes others. Without your willingness to do something, no matter who you are and what you do, other people, your city, and your nation will go wanting.¹ It takes your willingness to be brave, to invest even if it costs you, and rely on God to act.

Mordecai admonished Esther to act. It mattered what she did. She was the one in the right place at the right time.

This is the call to be brave. Cities and nations do not recover from adverse circumstances—and there are many—from hardships, from pandemics, from economic decline, from tension among races without courage. Three citizens took great steps of bravery.

Ezra felt moved by God to restore the faith of God's people. He knew they would need God's help so he taught them how to hear and follow God. Esther used her position to avert a terrible death threat, even at the risk of her life. Nehemiah also committed himself to God's vision because the city had to be rebuilt. They all three responded to God's call to be brave.

These are the necessary qualities needed to rebuild. Risk over safety; faith over fear; action in the face of need.

Is there something you need to stand up for? A job you are being called to do? A word you need to teach? A risk of faith you need to take?

We do not act alone! God is our refuge and place of safety! Just like God prepared Ezra and Esther and even the king for his rescue and renewal of their city, God prepares you, too!

God has a vision for the United States at this moment of crisis. Do you think you are to be isolated in First Presbyterian Church Duncanville? No! Your city and nation needs to pull through this devastating disease triumphantly. People of faith, you are to lead the way. You are not here only for yourself. God cares for this city and our nation too.

Will you follow the call to be brave?

AMEN

¹ Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, (New York: Dutton, 2012), 118-9.