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SERMON TITLE: A Victory of Courage

Rebuilding a City: Trusting God & Each Other

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 4

DATE: June 7, 2020

View online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

READ also *Colossians 3:1-14*.

Let's think through what we've studied.

Here you have this group of people, some who had lived in Jerusalem for seventy years, in rubble. Then there were those returning from being scattered afar. Then there were the men, women, and children who lived in the surrounding towns—who came to help do the work of rebuilding.

They were diverse.

We know this was an effort of prayer. We know God was the source of the vision to rebuild. Beyond anyone's wildest expectations the king supplied funds, housing, the necessary building supplies, and a military escort to get Nehemiah safely across the 900 miles.

After seeing the reality of the devastation, Nehemiah said, "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."

The leaders responded: "Let us start building!" *So they committed themselves to the common good.* (Neh. 2:17-18)

Nehemiah prayed, did his homework, and began the mission.

The town took it on—three generations working side by side; business owners and nobles, mayors, councilmembers, and priests, farmers and merchants. Fathers and daughters, sons and grandsons, construction workers and leaders are working diligently and with enthusiasm.

And along comes this crisis.

Sanballat, the governor of Samaria and Tobiah, the Ammonite, his junior colleague, showed up. They were from the north. With them is Geshem the Arabian, a monarch who held extensive power south of Judah. They explode in anger. They jump up and down in protest. They mock the progress. They shout insults. They call the workers—miserable.

The workers are dismayed.

But Nehemiah prays: "This is not right, God! They despise us for no good reason. Turn their words of hatred back on their own heads. Don't let us be defeated." (4:4)

So the workers went back to work and the wall was joined together to half its height, *for the people had a mind to work.* (4:6)

But then the crisis escalated. You would think that with prayer it would go away. It got worse. We find in the world that there's good and evil. It has been that way from Genesis 3. Two chapters in Paradise, the rest of the book in the struggle.

Now more people joined the ranks of their enemy—an army of Arabs (from the south), Ammonites (from the east) and Ashdodites (from the west) bearing down on them, creating as much intimidation and trouble as they could.

Nehemiah and the people countered with much prayer to God—in addition they set a round-the-clock guard against them.

Prayer, coupled with a well-thought-out plan for protection matters.

Soon, however, the job became too much: "We're in over our heads," they said.

Does the job you are doing ever get to be too much for you? Do you feel that you're in over your head? Are people abusing you all the day long?

The enemies stepped up the heat: "They won't know what hit them—we'll be at their throats, killing them right and left. That will put a stop to the work!" (4:10)

Do you ever feel like the fight is utterly relentless? That's how it felt to the builders in the heat of battle. Again and again they said, "*They have us surrounded and they're going to attack!*"

But Nehemiah looked over his plan and said, "Don't be afraid of them! **Put your mind on the Master. He's great and awesome!** Then fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

When you stick with the Master and stick with the mission, **you'll win!** When you commit to your family for the good of your family, **your courage will accomplish victory! You can accomplish heroic things.**

And so they did. They linked arms and hearts and with trumpet, weapons, work, family, **together in unity the mission went on.**

And the enemy retreated because the people never let go of the vision. They never let go of prayer. They stood in unity.

Now here, I am going to stop the sermon. I had a wonderful story of a woman who was stunningly victorious—her name was Bridget “Biddie” Mason, who lived in the 1800s. She was heroic. But we will save her story for another time. We need to talk about us this week. We need to let Nehemiah’s story speak into our turmoil.

It’s easy now to say it was easy for them then. But I assure you, that since Genesis 3, it has not been easy. In one chapter there was murder—brother against brother. How appalling for those very first parents.

Here we are not even to the middle of the book and we read a story of violence and in the next chapter, injustice.

We now find ourselves in the year 2020. I work hard to gain 2020 vision, adjusting my contacts and glasses each year to keep good vision. 2020 is giving us a vision of ourselves as the United States of America. We succumb to murder, violence, and injustice against each other. All horrible sins. Nothing right about it. It’s evil on every level. It’s the opposite of the justice called for in the Bible by Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets.

2020 also shows our way of dealing with our struggles: **division.** There’s no other word for it. That’s the way we are doing it. Nothing has diminished the division.

A nation divided against itself, Jesus said, will fall.

Why did Nehemiah and his diverse group of people win? **UNITY. They embraced their city as the city of God and committed to follow God’s vision.**

Unity in diversity.

I’ve been the pastor here twelve years. You know what all the work to make this church a light in this city has done for me? It’s made me fall in love with all of you. I have watched you put your heart and soul into the worship service; music; into raising our young in the church—parents, grandparents, foster parents, teachers, volunteers, youth directors, pouring your lives into them so they can be grounded to be our future leaders. You are pouring your lives into Sunday School lessons; caring through cards, emails, meals, mowing, planting, painting, mission trips, and all the work in the community. **The result has been unity and love among us.**

When the crisis hit us earlier this year, we all stepped up to continue the mission.

Now this underbelly, this 2020 vision of what’s going on in this nation. What are we going to do? More division? More hatred? More accusations? More injustice?

In Genesis 1 there was chaos and darkness. But, the Spirit of God swept over the water. In Proverbs 8 it says, The Living Word, whom we know as Jesus, was there. Father, Son, Holy Spirit: community. They were on mission, bringing order out of chaos, light out of darkness, life where none had existed, human beings made in God’s image.

So it seems there’s a choice to be made. We can live in Genesis 3, or live in God’s mission. Here’s how God’s mission plays out. Paul wrote this, a violent, unjust man who was transformed:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Jewish or non-Jewish, religious or irreligious, insider or outsider, uncivilized or uncouth, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, **which binds them all together in perfect unity.** (Colossians 3:1-14)*

Can the church become heroic again? Can a community become heroic in a crisis? Alexander Pope said, “Act well your part; there all the honour lies.”

AMEN

* The language inserted is from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* for the NLT words “Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.”

NEHEMIAH 4 ^{NLT}

Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, ² saying in front of his friends and the Samaritan army officers, "What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap-- and charred ones at that?" ³ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!"

⁴ Then I prayed, "Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land!" ⁵ Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders."

⁶ At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm. ⁷ But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. ⁸ They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion.

⁹ But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.

¹⁰ Then the people of Judah began to complain, "The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves."

¹¹ Meanwhile, our enemies were saying, "Before they know what's happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work."

¹² The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, "They will come from all directions and attack us!"

¹³ So I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears, and bows. ¹⁴ Then as I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, "Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!"

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. ¹⁶ But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. ¹⁸ All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm. ¹⁹ Then I explained to the nobles and officials and all the people, "The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. ²⁰ When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!" ²¹ We worked early and late, from sunrise to sunset. And half the men were always on guard.

²² I also told everyone living outside the walls to stay in Jerusalem. That way they and their servants could help with guard duty at night and work during the day. ²³ During this time, none of us-- not I, nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor the guards who were with me-- ever took off our clothes. We carried our weapons with us at all times, even when we went for water.