

Uncommon Sense Nehemiah 1: 1-11

Our challenge this morning is to take an Old Testament book, recorded about 400 years before the birth of Christ, written to a people much different than us, with dozens of hard to pronounce names and places, and gain wisdom and knowledge of God's will for His church here at Millcreek. The book of Nehemiah is a story of faithful remnant people, hard work, and new beginnings, and it brings us hope this first Sunday as we celebrate our new identity. A parallel book named Ezra fills in some of the blanks, and together they describe a diverse yet connected series of events that happened over a one hundred year period.

God is good, and if the temple walls of Jerusalem can be rebuilt in 52 days, certainly we can gain at least some understanding of Nehemiah and Ezra in the next few minutes. Long before King Artaxerxes appointed him governor of Judea, Nehemiah had a job that was much less glamorous. He was the king's cupbearer, perhaps the most important person on the royal staff. He was the one trusted to make sure the food and drink served to the king would not poison him. You might imagine how this Gentile ruler and Jewish layperson would have developed a special kind of friendship over the years and eventually Nehemiah capitalized on it. Ezra was a temple priest. More about him in a few minutes.

At the time the temple in Jerusalem had largely been restored, but the city walls- Nehemiah refers to it as "the city of my father's tombs" -were in a state of terrible disrepair. Not only that, the survivors or remnant of those who had returned from Babylonian captivity were living in distress and shame. Nehemiah had a desire to begin restoring both. Along with help from the Lord, he would need three things that only the king could provide- a temporary leave of absence from his duties as cupbearer, safe travel through the provinces under the king's rule to Jerusalem, and timber and other material resources for the building project. After much time in prayer and fasting, he approached King Artaxerxes with his request and much to his amazement, the king granted him all three. Not only that, God answered his prayers in a way even he could not anticipate, as eventually he would become the governor of Judea. God is pleased when we are faithful.

In spite of many obstacles and opposition, much of it internal from the Jews themselves, Nehemiah engineered and managed a very successful building project. He did not do it alone, for the walls required so much work that thousands of workers would be required. He recruited a great number of willing people, and as a result, they accomplished their task in a miraculously short amount of time. The people were dedicated and committed to their work. But despite their amazing success, they remained divided as a people. The problem was that their hands were in the right place, but their hearts still had a way to go. A greater miracle was yet to come.

The work of rebuilding the walls was finished just in time for the Feast of Tabernacles. As was the tradition all the people gathered and called for Ezra to read from the scroll. Surrounded by 26 helpers, the priest read from morning until midday- 6 hours or more. Those of you who are watching the clock should be thankful that the message this morning would not be nearly as long as that of Ezra and his friends with those strange sounding names. They did much more than read; the Bible says they helped the people to understand what they heard read. The ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law and the people began to say amen and lift their hands and worship with their faces towards the ground. They were not just worshipping they were also crying. Verse 9 tells us that **all** the people wept when they heard Ezra read the words from the scroll. Sure sounds like an early revival.

Their tears were not tears of joy or tears of sadness but tears of repentance, the same kind that have fallen on this very altar rail in front of us and countless others like it. The same people, who had toiled day and night to rebuild the temple and its walls, believing they were doing a mighty and righteous work for God, recognized their hearts were still in the wrong place. They wept when they heard Ezra read from the scroll. Hearing God's word allowed them to recognize just how far they had fallen short of the glory of God, in spite of their good deeds. Even more important, understanding God's word allowed them to know that God also offers what is needed to make things right. God is pleased when we seek His forgiveness.

Ezra's response to the people worshiping and weeping gathered in front of him is one of the most beautiful examples of God's grace in the OT. Look with me at what he said in the latter part of verse 9 and verse 10. "Do not mourn or weep. This day is **holy** to our Lord". Another way of saying that is "God is pleased". Though that early revival happened more than 2000 years ago, hearing and understanding the Scripture still is the primary means by which we recognize that God is perfectly holy and we are not. It is still the primary way that God showers grace upon us and moves us closer to Him.

God was pleased, not because they had rebuilt the temple and the city walls but because they had recognized their unwillingness to be God's people and sought forgiveness and restoration. Ezra's words, which are really an echo of God's words, remain powerful and true today. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. When God is pleased, we are pleased. Ezra was in effect telling them that as long as they were breathing it is never too late to make things right with God. It is never too late to put what has happened in the past behind us and start fresh. We must also be prepared for what lies ahead in the future, for another struggle is likely on the way.

The question for the week is this: what do we expect when we hear the Scripture read in worship? I am not asking what we expect of the reader, but what do we expect from ourselves and at the risk of sounding selfish what do we expect from God? Some might say they expect God to move us from complacency to action. Others might say they expect to hear God speak and lead, perhaps through the lips of the servant called to read from the lectern. Others of us, if we are honest, might have to admit we really expect very little, especially if the reading is a cryptic passage from the Old Testament with weird names and places. A growing number of 21st century Christians might even profess that the Bible is passé and out of date, no longer relevant for today.

It seems the people in Nehemiah's day tended to believe the same thing. The Scriptures were little more than words on a scroll until the day they gathered as one people expecting and desiring to hear God speak. Verse 3 says they were *attentive* to the book of the law, which we would recognize today as the first five books of our OT. Once they began to expect to hear God speak, they became a changed people. What keeps us from expecting to hear God speak? What is it that is keeping us from growing in our faith? Why do some people grow and mature in faith while others are simply running in place or even sliding down the hill backwards?

There are at least three distinct possibilities. Some of us just do not know how to begin. If you want to learn how to weld, ask a welder to show you how. If you want to learn how to fix cars or cook a gourmet meal, ask a mechanic or a chef. It is no different with spiritual things. If you want to become a more faithful Christian, get involved in one of the small groups at Millcreek and see for yourself. Holy Grounds Cafe, our mission team, our music team, and Wednesday Bible study are great places to start. Trying to become more faithful without relying upon the Holy Spirit and the church to help you is like trying to get your car unstuck from a snowdrift without calling a tow truck. More often than not, you will spin your wheels and ruin your transmission.

There are also those who unwittingly decide that other things are more important and place their possessions, careers, and family first. Of course, those things are extremely important as well as Biblical, provided we recognize that they are gifts from God. Yet if we do not make our faith a priority, chances are very good it will not become one. Late in life Nehemiah became a very wealthy and powerful man, feeding 150 people at his table. It was his faith and dedication to God that brought him there.

Last and not least are those who are satisfied with where they are at in their faith walk. Perhaps that describes the people in Ezra's and Nehemiah's audience, believing that they had already done all that they needed to do. They are like a Sunday driver enjoying the ride and oblivious to the impatient line of traffic behind them with places to go and things to do.

Perhaps we have recognized a bit of ourselves in these examples this morning. What do we do differently to allow our faith to mature? Should we sell our possessions and become a missionary or a monk? That may be what it will take for some. Before we call the auctioneer, we can do something far less radical first. We can begin by expecting to hear God's voice when we read or hear the Scriptures read. God will not disappoint us, even when it is a passage we have heard many times in the past or a passage with names and places we cannot pronounce. When we desire to hear, understand, and believe God's Word we will grow in our faith and the church will grow in faith. That is uncommon sense. My prayer is that you will join me and make it less uncommon in the days to come. Amen