

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 31, 2008)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

Putting Our Hands to the Good Work!

(Nehemiah 2:9-20)

Study #4

Introduction: The Power of VISION...

The bombs around Churchill

During September and October of 1940, German airplanes rained terror on London, England. For fifty seven consecutive nights, an average of two hundred planes per night dropped high explosives on the civilian population. Dubbed “Operation Sea Lion” by the Germans, these two months were one long nightmare for Great Britain.

During the daytime hours of those fifty seven days, Prime Minister Winston Churchill could be seen picking his way through the devastation, always dressed in his suit and derby hat, always chomping his cigar, encouraging Londoners on the streets.

But what were Churchill and his staff doing during the interminable nighttime bombings?

Historians tell us that every night, in a bomb shelter below Piccadilly Circus, with a desk illuminating a map of Europe, they had been planning the invasion of Germany.

Fascinating. They were planning for victory - in the face of attack. They were planning for an invasion while being invaded. They were planning for victory when all evidence pointed to the inevitability of defeat.

These men looked around them and saw the bombed out buildings that everybody else saw. But, then they envisioned something beyond the bombing. They envisioned a bright future and planned for it.

It is VISION alone that allows for such reckless planning.

Vision is birthed in the soul of a person who sees *status quo* as unacceptable. Vision is a clear mental picture of what could be fueled by the conviction that it MUST!

Churchill and others believed that the Allies **had** to be successful and that Europe **had** to be freed from Nazi tyranny. They believed that Hitler **HAD** to be stopped - and they stopped him.

Now, fast forward from 1940 to 2008.

Here we sit, a church in northwest suburban San Antonio. It may be hard to imagine this, but try. Right now, bombs are falling all around us.

The bombs around you and me

Bombs are falling on our church. You and I are commanded to love each other - the way Jesus loved us.

But the bombs of resentment (*Don't talk to me about being content!*) and suspicion (*I can't believe he is so narrow?*) fly. Worse, perhaps, there are bombs of apathy (*Who cares?*). And then isolation bombs (*I'd prefer to not get involved in other's messiness...*) and clique bombs (*Just us four and no more!*) and insensitivity bombs (*Her problems? What about MY problems!?*) fall constantly.

Bombs are raining on homes. Marriages struggle - in fact, divorces occur with alarming regularity, revealing the reality that, behind closed doors, things aren't as happy as they appear on Sunday mornings.

Children and youth face unrelenting pressure to conform to social standards the Bible condemns. The Internet offers tremendous advantages along with “real and present dangers” for any home that aspires to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And believe me; I'm talking about all kinds of homes - homes where there are married couples with children, married couples without children, homes of single adults, blended families.

Outside the church, bombs are also falling. Included among the bombs being dropped on our friends and neighbors would be a smorgasbord of dangerous philosophies and false religions, all manner of unhealthy lifestyle choices, casual abuse of drugs and alcohol, sexual experimentation, and gross injustice toward the poor - to name but a few.

In 1940, while they were listening to the bombs drop, England's leaders planned an invasion of Nazi Germany. Today, Jesus Christ calls you and me to counterpunch in response to the bombing attacks going on around us - while the bombs are dropping.

Of course, we don't wage war the way it is waged against us!¹ We counterpunch with the weapons God provides: truth, faith, love, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, and prayer.

And in our Bibles, we have the example of a man who fought against the bombs and the rubble with Churchillian tenacity: Nehemiah.

Nehemiah lived in the fifth century BC, but his story is 2008 contemporary! He was an Israelite, but he speaks with particular relevance to our church.

And if Nehemiah teaches us anything at all, he teaches us that when the people of God, inspired by a vision for the glory of God, work together, they can accomplish great things for God - and quickly!

Over a period of five months, Nehemiah developed a vision for God's work that energized the citizens of ancient Jerusalem for a wall rebuilding venture.

He was living in the lap of luxury in the winter palace of the Persian capitol in Susa when he was confronted with the awful news of how things really were back home in Palestine.

¹ *2 Cor. 10:3-4 - For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, [4] for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.* See, too, Ephesians 6:10ff.

The bomb falls on Nehemiah - and births a vision

His brother, Hanani, told him, [1:3]...***“The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”***

Nehemiah was devastated by the news, but months passed before anything happened. Being King Artaxerxes' slave, it wasn't as if he could just stop his service as the king's cupbearer to take time to grieve. He continued carrying out his responsibilities, faithfully, day in and day out.

But alone, he grieved. He wept and mourned. Then he fasted and prayed. And then he planned.

Just as Churchill had planned the invasion of Germany while bombs dropped above him, so Nehemiah planned the restoration of Jerusalem while serving the king his wine and while Jerusalem lay in ruins eight hundred miles away.

When the day came that Nehemiah was unable to contain his grief and was sad in the presence of the king (a crime punishable by death!), the king noticed!

When the king asked why he was sad, Nehemiah spilled the beans and told the king, [2:3]...***“Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?”***

No vision moves ahead until someone sticks his or her neck out. And by those words, Nehemiah placed his neck on the chopping block!

When, against all expectations, the king asked, [2:4] ***“What would you request?”*** - Nehemiah was off to the races!

He asked for permission to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. He asked for letters guaranteeing safe passage through dangerous territories between Susa and Jerusalem. He asked for a letter from the king to present to Asaph, keeper of the king's forests in Lebanon, so that he could have enough lumber for all the building projects back in Palestine. And the king said *“Yes!”* to every one of his requests!

At so many points along the way the wall-building project could have been squashed.

- The King might have killed Nehemiah on the spot for sadness.
- The King might have denied Nehemiah the opportunity to go to Jerusalem.
- The King might have denied him letters of safe passage.
- The King might have denied him the supplies or the military support he needed.

From an earthly perspective, the fulfillment of Nehemiah's vision was totally dependent on the unlikely compassion of a pagan, self-centered king.

But the Bible tells us that these “squash points” were successfully negotiated [8b]...**BECAUSE the good hand of my God was upon me.**

Thinking of our present situation, we can be honest enough to say that there are no guarantees for the successful outcome of our plans - even the plans for what we want to do for God.

There are no guarantees that the plans and strategies we map out to counterpunch the attacks being leveled against us and our friends will be successful in exactly the way we envision them.

BUT, just as Nehemiah knew that the ultimate success of his plans would not be determined by the governors of the provinces through which he was going to pass or even by the mighty King of the Persian Empire, but by the great and awesome God he served, so we know that the ultimate success of any ministry plans we have are dependent on the good hand of our God!

After that dramatic scene in Artaxerxes court, the story of Nehemiah moves forward.

Seeing the Ruins Hatches the Plan (2:9-16)

From Susa, to Jerusalem (vv. 9-11)²

A safe and uneventful journey... (v. 9)

[2:9] Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

He had with him the letters guaranteeing safe passage through dangerous lands. He carried the letter he would present to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest. He also had with him military support (something he may or may not have asked for)!

He arrived safe and sound in Jerusalem, after a gloriously uneventful trip.³ And the only throat-clearing speed bump on the horizon is recorded at verse 10, foreshadowing trouble to come.

The first hint of opposition... (v. 10)

[2:10] When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite⁴ official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

Note to self/church: When we make efforts to push the purposes of God forward, there will be opposition.

Sometimes the “opposition” will come from within, as brothers and sisters here at church disagree with the means and methods chosen by one ministry to move the purposes of God forward. In that case, we can have honest, loving, respectful dialogue, can learn from each other, can modify and improve plans - and can continue moving ahead, together.

² We learn later in the book that Nehemiah was appointed the Governor of the Province of Judah at the time that he left Artaxerxes' winter palace in Susa.

³ How long might it have taken to travel from Susa to Jerusalem? We must assume a number of months.

⁴ We believe that these two men were probably influential chiefs of Israel's neighbors.

At other times, opposition may come from those who oppose the cause of Christ, the church and Christianity. They will be “**very displeased.**” In that case, we will continue ahead. Contending for the faith without being contentious. But we will move ahead, because our primary allegiance is to God and His purposes.

There. We are forewarned and forearmed. Opposition will come. It doesn't mean that we're doing anything wrong. It probably means that we're doing things right!

Now let's get back to the action and see what Nehemiah does, now that he has blown into town.

Three days to get his bearings... (v. 11)

[2:11] So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

He entered the city with no fanfare and laid low. For an activist laying low can be the most difficult assignment of all.

But, maybe, during these three days, we would have found him sitting on Jerusalem park benches, watching, listening, observing.

Cities do have a “feel” about them, an “emotional color” (EC). I spent the summer of 1976 in Germany with Greater Europe Mission. One long weekend, a group of us who were working at the Bible School together traveled to Berlin. We spent an afternoon in East Berlin (and this was long before the Berlin Wall came down).

As we walked through the city - this was thirty years after the end of World War II and some places were still bombed out - there was an overpowering sense of despair and gloom. People didn't meet you with eye contact; there was little talking; no music on the streets. The EC of East Berlin in 1976 was a dull, drab grey.

New York City has long had a reputation of being cold, insensitive and rude. A few years ago, I went to New York City to visit the Brooklyn Tabernacle, a church well known for a vibrant prayer ministry. I found New York City to high energy, fast-paced. I would have pegged New York's ET orange or red.

What do you think was the “mood” of Nehemiah's Jerusalem? Happy go lucky and carefree? Optimistic about the future? Not likely.

Spending three days sitting on that park bench and walking around in the city, I imagine Nehemiah finding himself in a sad place. Broken down walls lay at the city's perimeter. It was vulnerable to attack. Color Jerusalem blue.

Nehemiah had to get a sense of the emotional pulse of the place before he could speak to the people.

If you were to spend three days next week walking your neighborhood, spending time with your neighbors, sitting on your front porch and watching, listening, what would you discover? What color would you paint your neighborhood?

What about your workplace? Your school? Our city?

In any of these places, would you find a depressing sadness, pessimism, low energy? Would you find a bright cheerfulness and optimistic can-do spirit? Would there be a hunger and thirst for righteousness? A spirit of rebellion? Spiritual apathy?

Nehemiah was observing the state of the city. He found wreckage. And when he came to the end of those three days of laying low, he decided that it was time for him to see the walls he had come to rebuild, up close and personal.

Before he was going to be able to move the people of God forward into the work of God, he had to have intimate acquaintance with the current carnage.

Together with a few men, he took a midnight stroll around the city for a very secretive “look-see.”

The city as a whole didn't need to know what he was doing. This is reconnaissance. The only ones required were Nehemiah, his horse, and a few men to scope out the terrain.

Nehemiah describes the ride around the city. It was a tough ride.

The Rubble, Up Close and Personal (vv. 12-15)

[2:12] And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. [13] So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. [14] Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. [15] So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

Picture riding or walking on top of rubble. There is unsteady footing and there are no good paths. It's light enough outside to see some detail, but it is still dark. It's a nighttime ride.

Why nighttime? So he could keep his reconnaissance a secret. And why take a secret ride?

Because, when it comes to unveiling a plan and challenging the people of God to a great work, timing is everything. Nehemiah knew that until he had seen the wall for himself, it wasn't the time to speak or to make his plans public.

Timing is Everything (v. 16)

[2:16] The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

Nobody knew what he was up to. There were no leaks. When he spoke publicly, it was going to be as much a surprise as John McCain's announcement that Sarah Palin will be his Vice-Presidential running mate.

When Nehemiah returned from his excursion, he didn't immediately announce to the populace what he had done or what he had found out or what he had seen or what he had planned.

But, shortly after he had been "around the block," Nehemiah knew what the score was. He had seen the size and scope of the project. And it was time to go public.

Calling the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the general population together, he spoke in broad daylight.

Catching A Vision Energizes Us For Action! (2:17-20)

Nehemiah's Challenge (v. 17-18a)

First, look at how things ARE (v. 17a)

[2:17a] Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire."

That Nehemiah, what a great motivator!

Isn't it interesting that the first thing he does when he has everybody together is **remind** them of their sorry situation?

Why did he do this?

He has to do this, because the Jerusalemites have to face the reality of their need before they will consider the challenge to change.

We think, "*Well, they knew their need.*"

They knew that the walls were broken down. They were well aware that the gates had been lying on the ground in the ash heaps for 140 years.

They walked over the rubble every day on their way to their daily chores. They had all heard the jokes about "*ugly old Jerusalem.*"

Was it really necessary to remind them that the gates of the city had been burned by fire and that Jerusalem lay desolate?⁵ Yes!

⁵When Nehemiah calls the situation "bad" the word which we translate *bad* is elsewhere translated "evil" (Hebrew *ra*). There was something morally wrong with having the walls down, and God's city in disrepair.

And it was necessary because that was what the citizens of Jerusalem had gotten used to. Broken down walls was their *status quo*, their normal.

It was all they had ever known. Every person living in Jerusalem had known nothing but broken down walls, reproach, shame and contempt. They were used to it.

I can understand how 140 years worth of living with a bad situation might desensitize a person to the wreckage, how any of the Jews might have thought, *“What’s with this guy. We’re doing all right.”*

It’s happened to me at home...

From time to time, I’ve done a really good job of fixing something at home that has been broken. And then, at other times, when I’ve been pressed for time, I’ll fix something, *“for now.”* Have you ever fixed something, *“for now”*?

That’s when you replace a part of your fence that’s broken down with fencing that doesn’t quite match the original fence, because you had some fencing material lying around.

Or, maybe you get used to some clutter around the house. It feels comfortable. It’s not ready for the cover of House Beautiful magazine, but it’s home. It’s OK. And you get used to the clutter on the back porch, with things lying where they don’t really belong because it’s easier than putting those things away.

Then, right before you host a Welcome Dessert Fellowship for folks who are new to the church, you get things looking nice because you don’t want the guests thinking you’re a slob.

(By the way, these are MY pathologies, not Kathy’s! It’s led to some fascinating exchanges over the years, too...)

I can see how it might happen at a church, too. It’s conceivable that a church might become comfortable, used to the way things are, and not recognize that things are not as they should be. For instance...

- When you drove up to the church this morning, did you notice that there is a white basketball pole planted in the ground by the fence - without a backboard, goal, or net?
- Did you notice that the playground equipment out front looks a little tired?
- Have you looked at the parking lot surface and thought, “I wonder if we should have that recoated?”
- Did you look up at the façade and notice that the paint needs some attention?

Perhaps. But probably not, because if you’ve been coming for very long, you’re used to it. It’s OK.

Getting used to a less than perfect state of grounds and facilities is one thing. Another thing, a deeper thing, is getting used to a less than perfect status quo when it comes to ministry.

- From time to time, we see people come to faith in Jesus here. Why not more often? Why not routinely?
- From time to time, we hear of people finding deliverance from addictive lifestyles? Why not routinely?
- Why are families not being rescued from the ravages of divorce more frequently through the ministries of our church?
- Why are lonely and isolated people who have come to our church for some time still lonely and isolated?

Is it time, four weeks into a study of Nehemiah, in a season when we are praying and talking about staff changes and facilities development and ministry direction for us to hear Nehemiah say, *[2:17a]...“You see the bad situation we are in...”*?

When Nehemiah confronted his fellow Jews with the reality that they were NOT doing all right, he did so because it was the only loving thing to do.

He knew that until they saw how bad things really were, there would never be change.

The most powerful impetus to change I know is pain. The pain of the present will prompt change faster than anything else.

As long as there was complacency with the *status quo*, the walls would never be rebuilt, the people would continue to be a reproach, and God's purposes for them would never be realized.

In the fifth century BC - or in the 21st century AD - if God's people are going to be energized to get involved wholeheartedly in God's work, then they will have to see the wreckage. Have you seen the wreckage?

Human wreckage is right here with us in Braun Station, Northwest Crossing, Leon Valley, New Territories, and Hills and Dales.

Like Nehemiah and like the citizens of Jerusalem, we must see the ruins for ourselves. We must allow God to break our hearts over the ruins around us.

Look hard. Look inside. Look right here. Look all around you. As it was in Jerusalem in 458 BC, so it is now with us. There is wreckage and there is rubble.

And there is hope! Moving past the pain to the potential, Nehemiah issued a challenge **AND** an invitation to those who had gathered to him.

Now, envision what COULD BE (vv. 17b-18a)

[2:17b]...Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." [18a] I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me.

What a call to action! He included himself in their **project** with ***"let US rebuild."*** He included himself in their **predicament** with ***"WE."*** And he assured them of his **partnership** when he said ***"COME."*** not ***"Go."***

He told them stories from Susa about what happened in the court of King Artaxerxes. He assured them, ***"God is in this thing!"***

Now, one hundred and forty years is a long time. One hundred and forty years ago, the Civil War had recently ended. One hundred and forty years ago, my great-great grandfather was a young man.

And for one hundred and forty years, the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down. Neither Nehemiah nor any of the people he was speaking to nor their parents or grandparents had ever seen the walls up.

But, having been assured of the presence of God and having been challenged to the work of God, the people of God responded.

Vision Caught! (v. 18b)

[2:18b]...Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.

And just like that, the people turned to look to the future with excitement. They caught the vision of where God wanted them to go, and what God wanted them to do. There was energy because there was vision!

In the days of Nehemiah, the Jews of Jerusalem ***"put their hands to the good work."***

Today, God is invited you to put your hands to the good work, too. What will that look like for you?

Well, it might mean:

- coming to the Concert of Prayer set for September 13th, a Saturday evening of praise and prayer concerning the issues that face us, now;
- waiting on God as you do reconnaissance in your neighborhood, school, or workplace to get a fix on how best to serve the people there;
- beginning to attend the Men's Recovery Bible Study that starts on September 13th;
- signing up for the evangelism training course being offered on Sunday afternoons, starting September 14th;
- getting personally involved with someone who appears to be lonely and isolated;
- calling any one of the Ministry Coordinators - Youth, Children's Ministry, AWANA, Men's, Women's - and asking, ***"Where can I serve? How can I help?"***

With bombs dropping all around us and wreckage everywhere, now is the time to counterpunch with the most loving, servant-hearted, Gospel-energized effort our church has ever seen. Brothers and sisters, let us put our hands to the good work!