

Build the Wall

In the name of him who for us fulfills all of Holy Scripture, dear friends in Christ: The title of today's sermon may have led you to believe that I intend to step out of my calling as a preacher of God's Word and cross over into the fields of politics and national security. This, I assure you, is not the case. My job is to proclaim the Gospel to people of all political persuasions. Therefore I make a point of not mixing topics applicable to the kingdom of God with those of the kingdoms of men. That being said, there is a lot of truth to the old saying "good fences make good neighbors".

But no, the title of today's message refers to Nehemiah, a man for whom "Build the Wall" could have been both motto and watchword. It's what most of the book of the Bible that bears his name is about – though it wouldn't surprise me if you were unaware of it. In over twenty years of ministry, I've never preached or taught on Nehemiah, nor is his story one that appears in any Sunday School curriculum I know of. Yes, it's fair to say that Nehemiah rates right up there with Leviticus and Obadiah on the list of biblical books most likely to be neglected. But inasmuch as the Holy Spirit thought it good to inspire the writing of this sacred text and cause it to be included in the canon of Holy Scripture, it would be a mistake for us to neglect it altogether.

So, let's get to it. Nehemiah lived in what we call the post-exilic period, that is, after the exile of the Jewish nation. Quick history review: in 605 BC the empire of Babylon conquers the land of Judah and puts it under subjection. They take into captivity the first wave of exiles consisting of several hundred Jewish nobles and leaders, many of them related to the royal family. A few years later, in 597 BC, the Jewish nation rebels against their Babylonian masters. The Babylonians respond with a heavy hand. They re-subjugate the Jews, impose higher taxes, and this time take some 15,000 captives away. In 586 the Jewish nation rebels yet again (you'd think they'd learn, but they didn't). This time the Babylonians are mad. They decide to make an example of the Jewish nation and in particular their capital of Jerusalem. They lay siege to the city, eventually breaching the walls. A third of the population is already dead from starvation. Another third dies in the assault on the city. The remaining third is sold into slavery. The entire city with its temple to the Lord is leveled to the ground. Not one stone is left atop another. As far as the Jews are concerned, it looks like the end of the story.

But no: The Lord had long before promised to return his people to their homeland. And in 539 the Babylonians who have been running the show are defeated by the Persians who establish their own empire. They quickly snatch up all of the territory the Babylonians had and then some. One of the first things the king of Persia does (after throwing a guy named Daniel into a lion's den and learning something about the power of Daniels' God) is to give the Jews in exile their country back (these were the folks taken into captivity before the destruction of Jerusalem). The king told them, "Go back to your place in the world. Rebuild Jerusalem. And build another temple to that amazing God of yours. I'll even help pay for it."

So, that's what happens. The exiled Jews return. They reoccupy their place in the Promised Land. They rebuild their capital. And in 516 BC, 70 years after it was destroyed, they dedicate the second temple of the Lord where the old one once stood. And there was much rejoicing.

But not everyone was happy. The Jews' old neighbors: the Moabites, Edomites, Philistines, Syrians, Samaritans, and so on – the ones they used to fight with all the time – they weren't so keen on having the Jews back in the neighborhood again. So they tried all kinds of legal maneuvers to thwart the Jews and keep them down. They filed numerous complaints with the successive kings of Persia accusing the Jews of being disloyal and rebellious subjects, always plotting and scheming, up to no good. Their smear campaigns worked to a large degree. So, while the Jews were allowed to continue rebuilding Jerusalem, they were denied permission to build a protective wall around the city. And a city without a wall was in that day like a sitting duck: weak, defenseless, vulnerable to any and every attack – which is exactly the way the Jews' old neighbors wanted to keep them.

Okay, fast forward several decades. It's now the middle of the 400s BC. It turns out that not all the Jews who were in exile went home when they had the chance. No, after living so long in foreign lands, some of them found they were doing quite well for themselves, having acquired property and businesses and what not. Many of the major cities of the east had a permanent Jewish community living within them, each with its own synagogue. These people maintained close ties with their fellow Jews who had returned to the Promised Land, and they made pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem from time to time; but they preferred staying where they were in what was called the "Diaspora".

Nehemiah was one such Jew. His family had remained in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. That's where he was born and raised. And through the talents and opportunities the Lord gave him, he managed to land himself a job as the Persian king's personal cup bearer and wine steward – a fairly important position in that time. Besides making sure the king's wine cellar was always stocked with the best the empire had to offer, it was his job to ensure that no one succeeded in poisoning the king through his favorite beverage – which was a persistent hazard to anyone who occupied the most powerful throne in the world. Well, it happened one day while serving the king his cup that Nehemiah was a bit preoccupied. He had heard a bad report about Jerusalem's weakness, and how the city so dear to every Jew's heart was so vulnerable to attack. The king, seeing his trusted servant in distress, asked him, "Why the sad face, Nehemiah?" Nehemiah answered, "How can I not be upset when the city where my forefathers are buried is defenseless." The king, surprised, said, "What would you have me do?" Nehemiah prayed a silent prayer to the Lord and replied, "Send me back there. Give me permission – a royal decree bearing your imperial seal – that will allow the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt." The king replied (and I'm paraphrasing here), "I'll do that, and I'll raise you one: I'm appointing you the governor of the place while the work is underway. All I ask is that you return to me when the job's done. I like having you around."

It was more than Nehemiah could have hoped for. But now armed with his commission he set out. When he arrived in Jerusalem he took charge, laid hold of resources, organized crews and schedules, and set men to work on the task. As might be expected, there was blow back from the neighbors who tried to interfere so as to keep the Jews weak and defenseless, but Nehemiah dealt effectively with these obstacles too. Due in large part to Nehemiah's zeal, inspiring leadership, and dedication, Jerusalem was in what was almost a miraculously short period of time as well fortified as any of the cities of the ancient world. His mission was to build the wall. And he got'er done.

And that's all good; but at first brush, it may seem that there's nothing particularly spiritual or religious about this story. So, a guy builds a wall. Why is that in the Bible? Good question. Let me give you some answers. First there is the issue of placement and circumstance. The theme of our Lutheran School this year is *Chosen for such a time as this*.

It's an allusion to the story of Esther – who just happens to be a near contemporary of Nehemiah (her dates are a bit earlier). But you recall how it was through a series of seemingly unrelated events that she ended up being queen of the Persian Empire at just the right time and place to put her in a position to intercede for her people and save them from destruction at the hand of their enemies. The point being that they *weren't* unrelated events that caused her to be in the right place at the right time. It was the Lord's doing. Her calling was to be faithful and to use the place and position the Lord had given her to do the right thing – even at great personal risk. If she had chickened out, acted unfaithfully, the Lord could and would have saved his people by other means. He wanted to do it through her though. And she came through.

In a similar way, the Lord put Nehemiah where he was at the right time and place to be in a position to ensure that his people were given a secure place to dwell in the Promised Land. Now, did The Lord need Nehemiah to do it? No, he could have reached down from heaven and made a wall appear around the city by miraculous means. On the other hand, he could have defended the city without a wall – simply dropped fire from heaven on any would-be attackers or smote them with some kind of plague. But that isn't the way the Lord normally operates. Supernatural events are kind of by definition the exception. The Lord usually uses faithful people and natural means to get done what he wants done. The question is will you use the talents and opportunities the Lord has given you to do what he wants done? Nehemiah did.

So, that's one thing: the issue of placement and circumstance. A second item is the fulfillment of the promise. The rebuilt city of Jerusalem was not just any city; it's the city where the divine drama would one day unfold. The Lord had promised a Savior to his people – a Savior who would appear at the temple, in Jerusalem, and there undergo the ultimate sacrifice that would result in the salvation of all believers – Jew and Gentile alike. Nehemiah's zeal to make sure the city was defended was not about nostalgia for the past. No, he was looking forward in hope to the future, to when the promised Savior would come and be revealed. That, he knew, had to take place in Jerusalem, so he wanted to ensure that Jerusalem was defended so that it would last until the Savior came. A physical wall was the best natural means by which that could be guaranteed. So Nehemiah built that wall.

But Nehemiah also knew that there are walls of defense far more important than those made of stone. These are the walls that protect the hearts, minds, and souls of God's people from enemies far more dangerous and deadly than any human army. I speak of walls of faith and faithfulness founded firmly upon God's Holy Word. What good is it to defend a city and the people in it if in the end all of them wind up in hell? Jerusalem had walls before: high, thick, sturdy walls with fighting towers at regular intervals. But the city and those within it were destroyed anyway because they were unfaithful to the Lord. They weren't hearing God's Word. They weren't applying it to their lives to it. They weren't listening to the prophets the Lord sent them to call them to repentance and faith. They neglected to build up the defenses they most needed. And thus they were swept away both in time and eternity.

Nehemiah knew he had also to build the walls of faith in God's people. And so it is that we read how they directed Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law (what we would call the Holy Scriptures) and read it to all of the people in assembly. Not only did he read it, he and the other priests and Levites "gave the sense of it"; that is, they explained and applied it to those listening. In other words, they preached sermons based on it. And the people listened intently from sunrise to midday – about six hours in single setting. (And you think my sermons are long.)

Hearing the Word of the Lord read and explained, the people were stricken in conscience. They began to weep over their sins and trespasses. When they did, those

teaching them proclaimed also the good news. This is a holy day – a day of sacrifice by which the Lord forgives your sin and makes you his holy people. Rejoice. Feast. Drink sweet wine. Share with those who have none. The Lord our God is gracious. You be gracious too. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Indeed, it is the joy of the Lord to build up and strengthen the walls of your faith that come of hearing his Holy Word – the Holy Word by which he makes you his holy people. We don't live in walled cities anymore; but we need tall, thick, and sturdy walls of faith and faithfulness now as much as ever in order that we may be able to stand against the forces arrayed against us that seek to ruin our lives and destroy our souls. Indeed, we need walls within our walls.

While watching a history program the other day, I was reminded of an unusual battle I learned about many years ago as part of my military studies. It was fought by Julius Caesar and his legions as part of the campaign to conquer Gaul (what's France today). After pursuing the army of a particularly troublesome Gallic chief, Caesar managed to get them holed up in a fortified city. He laid siege to the place, surrounding it on all sides. The trouble was that with his force so thinly spread out, the enemy could mount a concentrated attack at any given point and break out of the trap. So Caesar had his men build a wall all the way around the city to prevent that from happening. Then Caesar's scouts reported that a large army was coming from the outside to break his siege, so Caesar had his men build another wall behind his force all the way around. They ended up in tactical doughnut with enemy forces both inside their position and outside it.

We Christians are in the same situation. On the outside beyond our wall of faith are two deadly enemies. There is the world that seeks to seduce us through its sinful pleasures and distractions, and there is the devil and his allies who seek by lies to deceive us. And contained within the inner wall of faith we've got another enemy: it's our own traitorous sin nature that would like to break out and run amok. It's a tight spot to be in. The enemy exerts constant pressure on all sides. To stand, to defend ourselves, we need walls. We need walls of God's Law to show us what is right and to reveal our sins and failures. We need walls of Gospel to show us that in Christ our sins are forgiven and that raise up and strengthen the new nature within us. We need walls of faith that can withstand the trials of life. We need walls of sound doctrine that reveal the lies of the devil for what they are. We need walls of virtue that give us the strength and will to resist temptation and to do God's will. We need the walls that are built by hearing, reading, marking, meditating upon, and inwardly digesting God's Holy Word.

At every moment of each day the Lord has given you this time, this place, your singular callings and vocations, your gifts and talents, and all the people in your lives. He's chosen you as his own – chosen you to be an instrument of his will. The question is: will you be faithful? Will *you* work God's will? Or will he have to find another way to get the job done?

May the Lord grant to each of us the grace and the will to accomplish all that intends for us to do. And may the Holy Spirit by the story of Nehemiah remind us to be constantly at work building the wall. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!