

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 3

“It Takes a Village”

Nehemiah 3 is the rather colorless account of forty crews working side by side, in forty-five sections

- Disparate people up till now
- From every profession, rank, class, age-merchants, shopkeepers, temple servants, farmers, herdsmen, daughters
- Who, after 140 years, were suddenly mobilized into community, galvanized into a common cause
- A people shaken out of their own self-centered concerns to share in something bigger than themselves
- Something “tipped” them over
 - A phenomenon Malcolm Gladwell writes about in his book, *Tipping Point*
 - Introducing it with this story
 - It was the afternoon of April 18, 1775
 - A young stable hand overheard a British officer say something about hell to pay tomorrow
 - And so he raced to a silversmith named Paul Revere
 - And he and the raiders (just kidding) warned the communities surrounding Boston, that the British were coming
 - And when the British came, to their unfortunate surprise, they faced a prepared and organized militia
 - That soundly defeated them and set in motion the American Revolution
- How did/How does this happen?
 - What creates an outbreak of change, what ignites a movement, a tipping point?
 - Gladwell describes it as a number of things, beginning with these two:
 - 1) An exceptional MESSENGER - an extraordinary person capable of starting epidemics
 - 2) An exceptional MESSAGE that if said right, will ignite a movement
 - This was the case with Nehemiah
 - An exceptional man with an exceptional message that galvanized a people to rebuild a wall
- But what is it that makes one exceptional?

- What is it that transformed a simple cupbearer into an extraordinary man?
- What is it that transforms us?

- Nehemiah 1-2 reveals that it is...
 - A) A HOLY DISCONTENT
 - B) That leads to HOLY PRAYER: that God will, must change things
 - C) That emerges with HOLY NERVE, unafraid to pull together the resources to do it
 - D) That communicates with HOLY CONVICTION
 - The conviction of CALLING, that God has set something in the heart
 - The conviction of PRESENCE, that God has set His hand on us
 - The conviction of SUCCESS, that God will do what he has promised

- But something else explains his extraordinariness
 - That created an outbreak of change
 - That led to Chapter 3
 - Going back to 2:17-18, we discover Nehemiah also had this, HOLY IMAGINATION

- People with imagination see, they see what others cannot see
 - And in this, they are prophets of sort
 - For the nature of a prophet is one that is a “seer”

- And here’s what prophets see, what Nehemiah could see
 - What we must see, if we are to infect others
 - Galvanize people to rebuild the unbrokenness around them

- 1) WE MUST SEE THE TROUBLE WE ARE IN
 - Coming back to chapter 2, Nehemiah appealed to their eyes, “You see, don’t you?”
 - It’s not that the people were unaware of their desolation, their insecure conditions
 - It’s not that they could not see the ruined fortifications, the charred posts, walls badly breached
 - Eviscerated carcasses, the ruins of former shops and homes, the graffiti
 - A city devoid of governance, THE MESS!
 - For close to 140 years, they saw this
 - They saw that Jerusalem stood as little more than a broken symbol of some scattered tribal people who once believed themselves to be God’s chosen people

- But they have missed the darker side of it all
- Nehemiah was awakening their eyes
 - a) "Look at the trouble we are in" was Nehemiah focusing their sights on something they most likely suppressed (verse 17)
 - The level of darkness we have chosen to accept?
 - "You see how willing we have become to abide by the claims of the prevailing culture?"
 - How deeply we have been co-opted by the evil one?
 - How easily we have accepted our present condition of hopelessness?
 - He uses a very dark term to in effect say, **"Can you see how far we are removed from the life God intended for us to have?"**
 - b) "Can you see the disgrace?" (verse 18)
 - The prophets warned repeatedly, "This is what happens when you choose to sin"
 - What any of us choose when we yield to the flesh, turn away from God
 - "You will destroy yourselves and make yourselves an object of cursing and reproach among all the nations" Jeremiah 44:8
 - And they had come to accept the permanence of this, the inevitability of living under the shadow of insult, scorn, shame
 - Nehemiah spoke with the candor born out of anguish and despair
 - There is no scolding, no reprimanding; the people needed none of this
 - What they did need, however, was to be brought out of their numbness
 - Told perhaps for the first time that **"THIS IS NOT THE WAY IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE"**

Illustration - I was waiting at the airport for Grant

- Waiting at the security section, which when originally, designed was to be a place for people to mill around, go to the gates
- But now was one big maze, with security points and e-ray machines and barriers
 - A blight, it's not the way it's supposed to be

- And every now and then, if we don't look back up at the design, we may just assume this is the way it's supposed to be

- Like lots of things, dysfunctional marriages, forged out of romance and affection and plans for a secure future

- But have deteriorated into little more than two people who have this in common: they live at the same residence

- Dysfunctional governing, that has led to a world of senate hearings and indictments and governmental paralysis

- Dysfunctional churches that become consumer oriented, insular, graceless

- Broken walls and vulnerable living

- IT'S NOT THE WAY IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE!

- But the scary thing is, you begin to accept that this is the way it is supposed to be

- This is life, deal with it

- And then a prophetic voice comes along and splashes cold water on your lethargic assumptions and says, "No - this is not the way it is supposed to be"

- This is nothing less than evil

- This is disgrace, this is our shame

- This is what one with Holy Imagination does, challenge everything that is perceived

- Call into question the present

- Nehemiah did, and it began to awaken them out of their deep sleep

- "It's time to change this!"

- And now Nehemiah moved to the other side of the prophetic task

2) WE MUST SEE THE HOPE THAT WE HAVE

- Nehemiah as an exceptional messenger with an exceptional message did what, up to now, few if any had done
- He did what prophets do (verse 17)
 - A) They bring to expression the hopes and yearnings that have been denied for so long, and suppressed so deeply that people no longer know they are in fact there
 - They awaken the hope that lies resident, but covered underneath layers of fear and rejection and cynicism
 - Nehemiah gave them words they had long forgotten
 - B) They challenge the people to stand up against despair, against this perceived permanent consignment to disgrace
 - Let's build so we no longer have to live in disgrace
 - C) And to make it sure, he put it in the language of God
 - For hope must finally be about us and God
 - This is why Nehemiah declares, "I told them about the hand of my God upon me"

Point - Nehemiah was doing far more than building a wall

- Helping people to see again
- Helping people see God in their midst
- A God who never quits, even when our unfaithfulness warrants His quitting
- Who is right at the center of the scene we had assumed He had fled
- And it became the tipping point

Application - Have you considered this:

- That we, the church, have been called to the same prophetic task as Nehemiah
- That when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, it was a prophetic Spirit that was poured out
 - Calling us to speak with a prophetic voice in our times

Unfortunately, "prophetic" is often shorthand for abrasive measures of indignation (screaming at people at a Blazer game—putting turn or burn on our bumper stickers)

The real prophetic task as the church (as the people of God), that serves as the tipping point, is to do the same two things as Nehemiah

- 1) Help people see the trouble we are in
 - Expose the darkness that aims to stay invisible, subversive
 - Do you see what the evil one is doing? Do you see what you are accepting?
 - That this is not the way it is supposed to be
 - Your life doesn't have to live at that level

- 2) Bring to public expression the hopes and yearnings that have been denied
 - Help people see the hope we have in Christ

It will not be easy - the main activity of the evil one is to blind people to their true condition

- Cause them to accept things as they are
- And rob us of our hope, reduce us to shame, drive us to despair, lower us to the level of cynicism, bring us to faithlessness
- And keep us from rebuilding brokenness

We too must commit to rebuild the walls of brokenness, in the world God puts us in

- It means all of us
- One repairing next to another
- So here's a tangible challenge, take this brick