

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 2:1-8

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“Courage That Wins the Day”

Today I want to talk about fear - something we live with everyday, more than I can remember

- Insurgents, terrorism
- Wilma at category one billion-smashing all records
- Hurricanes, so many they have exhausted the alphabet
- Bird flu marching across the world now hits Sweden
- And then there was this little known CNN story two weeks ago
 - Researchers, taking samples from lungs of buried soldiers, have re-created a copy of the bird flu of 1918
 - The Spanish flu-that killed 50 million
 - More people in 6 months than killed in all of WWI
 - The most devastating pandemic in recorded history
 - THEY’VE BROUGHT IT BACK TO LIFE!!
- And if that is not enough to shake us, there is this story coming out of Philadelphia
 - Donovan McNabb healthy for Philly/Charger game

It’s a wonder we keep our heads!

But God addresses our fears, often, through His word, as He does in the Nehemiah story

- Nehemiah, you may recall, is a world changer who presents a case study of sorts
 - The initial chapters tell us what’s required
 - 1) HOLY DISCONTENT (verses 1-4)
 - Hearts that capture God’s vision for their lives almost always begin with a grief over some brokenness
 - For life is largely about disrepair
 - Nehemiah’s world was broken, Israel was in ruins, God’s holy city of Jerusalem was a desolate waste
 - And the news wrecked Nehemiah
 - In all of this, he came back to this reality, that life is the story of God restoring, rebuilding what sin has broken
 - And realized he had been called, SUMMONED, into this story

- Just as you and I are summoned
 - There is something God wants **us** to do, not wait for Him to do
 - Us to do individually, corporately
 - A vision, a calling God waits for you, us to embrace, pursue, fulfill

- And as Nehemiah faced this question, so do we
 - Will we rise to the occasion when life calls us forth?
 - Be it take up roots and go overseas
 - Put down roots and change our workplace
 - Engage in the lives of your neighborhood, pray down the walls in Portland
 - Bring re-birth to the church
 - Anything less is trespassing through life
 - For without a vision, we are without a future

Something else explains Nehemiah

2) HOLY PRAYER (verses 5-11)

- Discontent overwhelmed him, driving him to his knees - AS IT MUST US
- Verses 5-11 invite us into Nehemiah's essential prayer
- It is here, in the quiet, he comes not to escape life but to encounter God
 - And it is in this context vision germinates, solidifies, confirms
 - Spend enough time in prayer, and we move from speaking to hearing
 - And we find what we need to know, God is able, willing, ready
- Nehemiah is now on a trajectory
 - There is no turning back
 - Nehemiah can see a restored Jerusalem, a place where God will once again be worshipped, where lives will once again find stability, find home
- So he prays for success, favor in the presence of the king - today!!
 - And today has come
 - It is time for the third requirement of world changers

3) HOLY NERVE

- We're back to our subject - FEAR
- Grabbing hold of a vision for God and pursuing it is scary (read 2:1-2a)
- Like all of us, Nehemiah would need courage - guts

A) NERVE TO STEP OUT WHEN ALL YOU MIGHT HAVE IS A PASSION

- Because this is all Nehemiah had
 - He had not been anointed by a priest like Samuel, a prophet like Elijah
 - Had not experienced an Abrahamic-like call, a Joshua-like moment where he was commanded to remove his sandals
 - No Damascus Road encounter
 - No burning bush, only a burning heart
- God was choosing to remain silent, except for the tumult He had placed in Nehemiah's heart
- It would take holy nerve to step out with that
- For most of us, it is the same thing
 - Something inside our soul has turned sideways
 - Will we have the nerve to act upon this holy discontent?

B) NERVE TO STEP OUT WHEN ALL YOU SEE ARE OBSTACLES, TERRIFYING UNKNOWNNS

Nehemiah faced his own

1) THE UNKNOWN OF HOW A KING WOULD RESPOND

- A ruler hardened by countless uprisings, suspicious of any rebuilding efforts
- He had already shut down rebuilding efforts under Ezra, construing it as a rebellion (Ezra 4)

2) THE UNKNOWN OF HOW TO RESOURCE THE VISION

- He would need authority to get past the gatekeepers
- He would need manpower
- He would need supplies, materials, governmental assistance

Illustration - Last Sunday night, we approved a 16 million campaign to build a new church

- And suddenly, I feel like Nehemiah
- "Lord, How can we resource this vision?"
- It will take a holy nerve
- So I promptly prayed on Friday, once the largest lottery winner was announced "God, make the Powerball winner a Villager."
- No, of course not, well, sort of not
 - I did pray

- The reality is, any great vision will take monumental faith, nerve, tenacity
 - God will not let us bypass faith, waiting, trust
 - God seldom says “I’ll go *for* you,” but rather, “I’ll go with you”
 - Words that serve as both promise and warning, you can’t go it alone
- For the road is seldom straight, it is a hazardous road
- One that is fraught with the potential for both success and failure
- Are we up for the risk of both?
- “People have a failure of nerve because they don’t have the nerve of failure” - *Sweet*

- Where does one get that kind of nerve?
 - For most of us are not born courageous, we start off as cowards
 - The reality is, the Bible isn’t a record of God finding courageous men and women who laughed in the face of danger
 - Just the opposite: Adam hid, Abraham lied; Moses ran; Esther looked for excuses; Elijah gave up; Jonah headed for a travel agency; Peter denied; John Mark jumped ship.

- Jesus didn’t say, “I am the lion tamer, and you are the lions”
 - The metaphor of sheep fits
 - But in all of this, God is transforming weak people and calling them to live with holy nerve
- As he is in this story
- For fear had set in
 - It is the month Nisan
 - Sometime after his prayer, he came down from the mountain full of courage, but time has a way of dissipating it
- Though he had prayed “grant success today,” it would seem that “today” had passed by
 - A God dominated imagination had given way to a king dominated imagination
 - Fear, mixing it up with holy discontent and divine calling
 - And it was messing Nehemiah up, just as it can mess any of us up
 - Nehemiah was miserable, something he could no longer hide
- “Why is your face so unpleasant, disagreeable, bad? This is nothing but sadness of heart”
 - It was an unsettling question
 - Asked not so much by a friend, but by a superior

- Nehemiah had failed at his job-cup bearers are paid to make king's merry

Illustration - Jennifer Rubell, co-owner of Rubell Hotels, has the title "Director of Vibe"

- She understands that as social creatures, we pick up signals, vibrations from others
 - So she "intensifies the vibe"

- Nehemiah was the Director of Vibe, pour the wine and start the party

- Keep your personal feelings to yourself, make us feel good!
- But Nehemiah was doing just the opposite
- And Nehemiah was suddenly unnerved
 - The language underscores this "and I feared with great force"
 - Standing before the most powerful king on earth
- Especially a capricious king who, in his mercurial moments, could simply require someone's head
- Nehemiah was in panic mode that comes out in the following statements (read 3a)
- Nehemiah gave it his trembling best
 - "Long live the king!! More wine?"
 - There is little holy nerve in the rest of the verse (read 3b)
 - Too fearful, perhaps, to mention the city by name
 - Too timid to present his request, Nehemiah went the safe route and appealed to the emotions
 - To a universal respect for ancestral tombs
- The king pressed (read 4a)
- The moment Nehemiah had prayed for had come
 - And Nehemiah is getting deeper in the mud of fear
 - Until he went back to what he should have done from the start
 - What you and I must always do (read 4b)
- Nehemiah knew he was insufficient for the moment
 - One can hear the interplay (because it happens within us)
 - "Lord, I am afraid"
 - "Who are you afraid of Nehemiah? Me, or him?"
 - "King's hearts are in My hands"
 - "They are merely instruments of My purposes"
 - "Lord, I have no voice"

- “Then let Me speak through you, for My whisper can break the cedars of Lebanon”
- “Lord, I have no means”
- “I won the cattle on a thousand hills”
- “Lord, this is all too great”
- “Whose greatness are you impressed with?”
 - “I call the stars by name, I weigh the mountains on a scale, I blow away kings like so much dust”
- “Lord, give me courage”
- “Courage isn’t the absence of fear, but the absence of self”
 - “Move out of the way Nehemiah”
- And in the moment, he did
- What follows in verses 5ff can only be explained as a God thing
 - The kind of thing forged in prayer
 - Nehemiah stepped out with a holy nerve (verses 5ff)
 - A) Send me
 - B) Give me
 - The necessary time
 - The necessary authority
 - The sufficient resources
 - He dared to ask for great things, and never looked back
 - And Nehemiah knew where to rest the credit (verse 8b)

So what is God teaching us?

- 1) Visions go nowhere apart from Holy Nerve
- 2) And where does holy nerve come from
 - The record is clear - HOLY PRAYER

So where are you?

- Still figuring out God’s vision for your life?
- Facing obstacles that are creating their own panic?
- Replace it with a God dominated imagination
- Unashamedly pray for God’s hand to be on you, for the future waits
- Its speed is directly affected by our courage