

10.30.22 – Pentecost 21

“God Equips Them!”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Nehemiah 6:1-4, 11-13, 15-16 (NIV) ~ Pam

¹ When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—² Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.” But they were scheming to harm me;³ so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”⁴ Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

¹¹ But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”¹² I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

¹⁵ So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

Opposition to the Completed Wall

¹⁶ When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

L: These are the Words of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 10:34-39 (NIV)

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.³⁵ For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

³⁶ a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

³⁷ “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Leader: These are the Words of Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Faithful God, we thank you for our rich Bible history and its men and women of faith. We also thank you for a fresh way to look at ordinary things in life, both the challenging and the joyful. May we see and sense **you** in a more extraordinary way even as we go about ordinary days. We are happy to worship together again; please

be with those who are not here today. Open our minds and hearts now as we hear more of Nehemiah's story. Let me be your messenger today. Amen.

Thank you for your notes, texts, and calls to check on me! I am happy to be safely back among you, even if I do keep my distance for a week or so more. I heard David, Melissa, Debbie, and Aubrey did a wonderful job of leading worship; and of course, I thank them and Kyle for his constancy in leading Bible Study and moderating the Council Meeting. Thank you **all** for being here; **you** are the church!

I will do my best to briefly combine the passages from last week and this week to tell more of Nehemiah's story. As we learned, the local officials mocked the work of Nehemiah and his men, as they cleared rubble and re-built the Jerusalem wall. Nehemiah's strategy to deal with the bullies was to go to God in prayer. Like any human, we have mixed motives when we ask God for things or actions. In our pure hearts, we desire his will for the situation, but in our flawed minds, we often want revenge or a solution more to our liking. "Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity (Neh. 4:4)." That's hardly a compassionate prayer. He was angry and his outburst asked God for vengeance not forgiveness. This is a good warning for us to guard our own anger when we are faced with bullies or difficult situations; Christ tells us in the beatitudes to turn the other cheek and forgive our enemies. God does not honor self-righteous anger, so please let our politicians hear that before November 8th! God did not honor Nehemiah's request, and because the people had a mind to work, they kept building, despite more insults to come!

Sanballat and Tobiah's men were angry at the progress and planned to attack Jerusalem. Nehemiah heard that news, so we read in verse 4:9, the builders went to God again in prayer this time with the right motives. Nehemiah set up a guard to protect their workers and productivity. It was obvious to their opponents that God had frustrated their efforts at intimidation. From then on, half the workers built, and half defended and guarded with spears, bows, arrows, and shields. Those who moved the stones kept one hand on a weapon, and one hand on the load. They spread out the workers too for protection by families and clans, so they would be loyal to protect one another. Whenever the trumpet would sound, they were reminded that God would fight for them too; they were not alone in their efforts. Nor are we ever alone in our Kingdom efforts.

Nehemiah resolved his anger by accepting the human responsibility of the arduous work and prayed for God's divine intervention. He trusted God to help them not just survive the pending attacks, but to achieve their goal of rebuilding. Their reward was speed and safety.

But in chapter 5, there were complaints from the people about what they had given up in their exile and the role now to build the wall. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham the Arab were furious that the people completed the wall, and so devised a trap for Nehemiah by trying to prove treason. Cleverly, the invitation sounded diplomatic, but Nehemiah did not trust them and claimed to be too busy to go meet them in the temple. Besides, that would be a cowardly act and a cultic faux pas. The doors or gates were not yet finished, so he turned them down. Nehemiah kept secret his suspicions that they wished him harm and promised to go later. Realizing his own exhaustion and the need to finish the wall,

Nehemiah again turned to God to strengthen his hands and give him the wisdom not to be fooled by his enemies. He was sure they were “setting him up,” and the page fragments do not tell what happened to the prophet, Shemaiah, sent to kill Nehemiah, only that Nehemiah achieved his goal.

After 52 days with God’s help, he and the people finished the task. The historian Josephus claims the work took 2 years and 4 months (about 850 days), so the 52 days might have been a copyist error, or Josephus had more information from another page fragment. The timeline might have been figurative, and not literal. The east wall was rebuilt, but the rest was simply repaired and restored so a shorter timeline makes sense. Scholars now rarely dispute the timeline, agreeing that in sight of their enemies, even with swords and spears, the people were highly motivated to work faster and that with God’s power, anything was possible! Even their enemies realized that God had rebuilt the wall, with his people’s faith, hope, and loyalty. The “people had a mind to work” and collaborated with God in an ordinary building process to overcome obstacles and enmity through extraordinary faith.

Back to Matthew Chapter 10, Jesus warned his faithful apostles they might experience hatred or ridicule as they evangelized from place to place. They would even meet resistance within their own families and friendships. It would not matter if they were true to their faith, because despite any suffering, Jesus promised them deliverance. These warnings came even before Jesus himself experienced persecution at the cross. He used the image of sparrows again to illustrate God’s love for his children. “²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they

(Matt 6:26)?" and last week's passage: "29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care (Matthew 10:29)." God cares even for them by providing food and shelter; how much more would he provide for his apostles who testify about the glory of his Son? If they acknowledged Jesus publicly to others, the Father in heaven would recognize their journey and faith, on earth and in heaven.

In today's passage, sternly, Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. Families will be divided in beliefs; relationships will be broken if one's priorities are out of balance. Anyone who puts another before Jesus will be denied eternal life. Again, these are instructions for the apostles heading out into the unknown to share the Gospel. They will not face just ridicule or hatred, but even death. Are they ready for that? True disciples must be ready: "38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:38-39)."

This connects with the pressure Nehemiah and his workers were under as they rebuilt the wall. If they surrendered to the will and power of God, they were spared. If not, they would be denied eternity with God. Enduring hostility comes with ministry sometimes, not always. And confession and denial of self always comes with ministry and missions. Are we ready to both do the work and defend the work? Are you seeking the extraordinary opportunities in the ordinary bits of ministry? Let us rebuild together: our faith, our building, grounds, programs, and our congregation as we work for and with the community in new ways; this is

the best way to share the Gospel and thwart the enemies of our faith! By example – Amen? Amen! ||

Will you pray with me? All knowing God, thank you for these awkward yet true illustrations of your supernatural power to have ordinary men do extraordinary things. May their faith and bravery encourage us to reach goals set by you! May we continue to listen for your guidance in all we think, say, and do, and stretch for the goals you are giving us, your congregation. We humbly ask these things, in Jesus' name, **Amen.**