

10.16.22 – Pentecost 19
“An Extraordinary Goal”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Nehemiah 2:5-8, 17-20 (NKJV) ~ Pam

⁵ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.”

⁶ Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), “How long will your journey be? And when will you return?” So, it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

⁷ Furthermore I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors *of the region* beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which *pertains* to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy.” And the king granted *them* to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, “You see the distress that we *are* in, how Jerusalem *lies* waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.” ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken to me.

So, they said, “Let us rise up and build.” Then they set their hands to *this* good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard *of it*, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, “What *is* this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?”

²⁰ So I answered them, and said to them, “The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore, we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.”

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

Matthew 10:2-7, 16-20, 40 (NLT)

² Here are the names of the twelve apostles:

first, Simon (also called Peter),

then Andrew (Peter’s brother),

James (son of Zebedee),

John (James’s brother),

³ Philip,

Bartholomew,

Thomas,

Matthew (the tax collector),

James (son of Alphaeus),

Thaddaeus, ^[b]

⁴ Simon (the zealot^[c]),

Judas Iscariot (who later betrayed him).

⁵ Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with these instructions: “Don’t go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, ⁶but only to the people of Israel—God’s lost sheep. ⁷ Go and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

¹⁶ “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves. ¹⁷ But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and will be flogged with whips in the synagogues. ¹⁸ You will stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell the rulers and other unbelievers about me. ¹⁹ When you are arrested, don’t worry about how to respond or what to say. God will give you the right words at the right time. ²⁰ For it is not you who will be speaking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

⁴⁰ “Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father who sent me.

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

Please pray with me:

Faithful God, once again, 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 the ordinary things of life, both the challenging and the glorious, so that we may see and sense **you** in a more extraordinary way. We are happy to be together in worship; so, please be with those who could not be here today for whatever reason. Expand our minds and hearts now as we search for the extraordinary in the ordinary. Let me be your messenger today. Amen.

I have some good news! Our contractor was here this week! He turned off the cold Air Conditioning, did some repair, and it already feels warmer in here, right?! Next Sunday, you might need to wear layers you can remove rather than add if the weather gets warmer again. It was a chilly, but clear and beautiful early Saturday morning yesterday at the Annandale CROP walk, where your commitment to ending food insecurity was represented. Supervisor Penny Gross was there and sends her regards. It was very hopeful to see new faces and young people from Annandale High School and local churches participating once again.

My sermon title should have been “Two Extraordinary Goals,” since we’re speaking of both Nehemiah’s desire to rebuild the Jerusalem

Wall and Jesus' desire to build the Kingdom of God. Well, we only have a few minutes to touch on both, so I encourage you to read more than just what we read this morning. I was taught to read the whole chapters right before and right after the selected passage to get a full understanding. Many of us know the name of Nehemiah as the cupbearer to the King. That person would taste the beverages before the King did, to prevent someone poisoning the king. This was King Artaxerxes I of Persia who reigned twenty years, from 465–424 BC. We need a little historical background first. If you recall our message of Solomon's building the first temple in 2 Chronicles, know that in 586 BC, the neo-Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar II, took over the Holy Land, destroyed that Temple of Jerusalem, and took the Israelites into exile. You can read more of their history, King Cyrus' triumph, and the return of the exiles in the book of Ezra and Haggai. Nehemiah returned from exile with the third group of Israelites coming home in about 446 BC. By that time, Kings Cyrus and Darius had rebuilt the temple; that is where we are now.

Upon returning home, Nehemiah discovered that during the years of Babylonian occupancy, pagan worship and practices prevailed, and Israelites had intermarried with non-believers. A saddened Nehemiah also learned that although some had rebuilt the temple, no one had rebuilt the **wall** around Jerusalem. He prayed to the "God of Heaven" for four months for wisdom about this weighty burden. One day the burden showed in his expression, although usually around the king, Nehemiah was a happy man with a cheerful outlook (he was no longer in exile!). When the king noticed and asked him why he was sad, Nehemiah explained and asked his permission to go to Jerusalem to survey the

damage and to see what could be. The king did better than just a letter of permission and sent with him a contingent of skilled men. [Daniel 9:25 had prophesied about these matters 95 years earlier.] He first surveyed the situation and kept praying for God's wisdom. No Jews came to welcome him; instead, he encountered local officials who were not happy with the idea of Israelites progressing. They mocked and ridiculed his efforts.

All this I have told you so far seems very ordinary in today's world context—think Syria, Crimea, Ukraine (war, siege, destruction of antiquities)—yet Nehemiah's response, because of his strong faith and persistent prayer, accomplished an extraordinary goal to rebuild the wall protecting the city of Jerusalem. We will learn more of this story next week, understanding his obstacles, his faith as called by God, and God's supernatural support.

The Matthew passage is familiar to most of us as Jesus called his disciples to follow him. The wording is a bit different – Matthew calls them apostles: literally “messengers.” We sometimes use those words interchangeably, but there is a difference. They were both disciples and apostles. **Disciple** comes from the Greek, *mathetes*, "a learner," from *manthano*, "to learn"; and from the Latin *discipulus*, "a scholar". **Disciple** also refers to a follower of Jesus or a pupil or student. Apostle is also a follower of Jesus, with some authority. Its Greek root is *apostolos*, which means a messenger, envoy, or ambassador. We typically see it used in the Book of Acts, about Barnabus and Paul, but here it refers to the Twelve, because the context is Christ commissioning them to go out. He has already taught them what he could (through the Sermon on the Mount,

healings, miracles, and parables), so ready or not, they are being sent out on a mission of preaching and healing that is modeled on his own.

He sends these twelve ordinary men to the Jews who have lost their way within the institution (the lost sheep); his Kingdom message is to uproot their understanding of governance and organized religion, and to introduce himself and his teachings to those who might be receptive. The Jews, God's own, must be given the first chance of salvation. Jesus knows there will be many who will reject him and his followers, no matter their calling or commission. Shrewd as snakes was confusing to me at first. Did you know that "snakes do not rely on sensory input such as eyes, ears, and nose? They have specialized sensory organs that pick up thermal readings, vibrations through their jawbones and scent particles in the air with their tongue, which they touch to a sensitive Jacobson's organ in the roof of their mouth. Snakes discern what others don't see, hear or smell (Quora online tool research paraphrased)." The apostles must be discerning about who they speak to—no Gentiles or Samaritans.

And what about the doves? His witnesses are to be as harmless as doves; Jesus instructs the apostles about peace. Isn't the dove often considered a symbol of peace? "When you come into a house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you" (Matt. 10:12-13). Noah sent out the dove to determine the conditions of the land, and so the disciples could send out their peace to determine the conditions of the people. If their peace found a place to land, then they were supposed to be in that place. If it didn't, they were to move on (Quora research paraphrased). So, he cautions them to be wary

of those who will condemn them yet be hopeful and encouraged by the extraordinary Spirit of God who sends them.

Like any worthy ordinary goal, there will be challenges; they would be like sheep (the prey) among wolves (the predator). They would have to be discerning, cunning, yet also innocent and pure to be believed; to receive the message of one of these apostles would be like receiving Christ himself! Ordinary men of character, loyalty, and purpose conveyed the extraordinary Kingdom message from Christ, just as we ordinary Christ-followers share our faith in the Risen Christ to others, not in our own strength or intellect, but in God's supernatural power and omniscient wisdom. Let us re-build our faith, our building, and our congregation as we share our testimonies with ordinary people like us! Amen! //

Will you pray with me? Omniscient God, thank you for these 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 your congregation. We humbly ask these things, in Jesus' name, **Amen**.