

## Even With the Best of Intentions

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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I have a confession to make: I somehow graduated with three theological degrees.... And for whatever reason.... managed to never have read the book of Nehemiah...truth be told... I never read Nehemiah until I began to prepare for this sermon today. When I turned to the Lectionary and discovered today's passage... I was intrigued... and decided it was finally time to stop ignoring this book and dive in. I was such a novice to the book that I took an online class about Nehemiah... and now I can officially say I find the book enthralling and I'm obsessed with it right now (and Crawford is anxiously awaiting for me to stop talking about it all the time)...For me... It has been a delight to find a hidden corner of the Bible that was unexplored...

The book of Nehemiah is shortish book found in the middle of the Old Testament- it comes right after Ezra and right before the book of Esther... and I think it is a common book to overlook- I don't think I'm the only person to have overlooked it- or not have read it. And there are several good reasons for folks to dismiss it.

For one, I think the book is overlooked because- as the teacher in my class said- reading the book of Nehemiah can feel like reading the third book of the Lord of Rings when you haven't read the first two books. (What is hobbit? Why is this ring so powerful? Elves are powerful? What is Mordor?) This feeling happens for one because Nehemiah was originally a part of the book of Ezra- In our modern bibles the books have been split into two separate books- but Ezra and Nehemiah were originally written by the same author and tell one story. So to start with Nehemiah is literally starting with the sequel. And if that isn't confusing enough.... The author of Ezra/ Nehemiah assume that you have a good understanding of other books of the Bible (specifically Jeremiah). And so to just start reading Nehemiah without understanding the context and history... and Jeremiah's prophetic pronouncements... you can get confused rather quickly. And understandably give up....

And then.... if you make it past all that- you then encounter a book of the Bible that is not exactly hopeful...in fact one might argue that Ezra and Nehemiah are the opposite of hopeful.... We are all used to a Typical story arch having conflict or hardship in the middle, but expect an end that is happy or at least a lesson learned. But, Ezra/ Nehemiah flip that paradigm by beginning with a lot of hope, and then ending with all of that hope being lost and the reader is left to wonder what just happened? so ... we have a confusing unhelpful book of the bible....

One might say... let's go back to skipping this book... but I wonder if we skip it... we might miss an important lesson that God is hoping for us to hear today.

To understand the text we read today... you have to know a little bit about the story that precedes.... Our text today on its own appears to be a very lovely scene... but what comes before it and after it- tell a different story. Ezra and Nehemia take place about 50-70 years after the Jewish people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. The Babylonians have now been dethroned by the Persian Empire, and the Persian king decides to let the Jewish people return home to rebuild their temple, follow their laws (the Torah), and rebuild their city walls. As readers we are supposed to wonder... is this God's plan for healing and restoration for the people of Israel? ... Maybe this is it! God's plan to restore them to their former glory? As the story unfolds there are three sections of rebuilding that we encounter...

First they rebuild their temple- the house of God... that is to be the center of their society... and the place to gather to worship their God.

Secondly, Ezra (the high priest) begins to teach them the Law (The Torah- the writings and teaching of Moses)- After a long captivity in a foreign land... folks have forgotten the answer of Who am I? And Ezra turns to the Biblical story to answer that question.... To follow the law instructs one's day to day life... it tells you What holidays to celebrate? What to eat? How to structure your family.... and How to practice sabbath?

Thirdly, Nehemiah comes to restore and rebuild the walls of the city... giving definition and boundaries to their homeland.

But.... with each of these three sections Ezra and Nehemiah accomplish the task on the to do list- temple gets built, the Torah becomes the Law, and the city walls get built... However, in each of the three sections there is all sorts of conflict and resistance... and in each of the three sections Ezra and Nehemiah respond to conflict by being rigid- creating boundaries of the in group and the out group causing deep divisions and hostility among the people.... Ezra and Nehemiah think in only the binary... there is a right way and wrong way... and nuisance to not to be considered.... and because of all this at the end of each rebuild section we the reader are left wondering- is this really God's restoration? Is this really God's plan?

And so... All of that is in the background of the text Dave read to us today... the temple is rebuilt, the torah is law of the land, and the city walls are complete... and even though there was a lot of conflict on the way.... The people have gathered to celebrate their accomplishments in the midst of it all. And so we read that it is the first day of the seventh month- which tells us that this is Rosh Hoshanah- The Jewish celebration of the New Year- at Rosh Hashanah folks celebrate but also reflect on the past year and to ask forgiveness for any wrong that one might have done. So that is what the people have gathered to do at the Water Gate- celebrate the New Year and repent for wrong doings of the past year.

At this particular observance of Rosh Hoshanah, Ezra comes out and begins to read from the Torah- our text today says he reads from the Torah from daybreak to midafternoon- and

while he reads his fellow priests are walking about the crowds, interpreting the law of God to any who needs understanding.... And the people's response to the hearing of the Law is to weep...we might wonder why they weep? One scholar suggests they wept because they were confronted with how many ways they had failed to fulfill the laws of Torah. But maybe they wept because they had made it through the ups and downs of captivity, traveling home, and through a tough conflict filled rebuild... maybe the weeping was a collective response to decades of trauma. Maybe they weep from relief... hoping that celebration marks the end of what has been a difficult journey. In Bible Study this week Lois Dokken suggested maybe they weep because they were just so relieved to be together....(a feeling many of us can empathize with while having to worship via our computers.... feeling distance and isolation from our beloved worshipping Community). In response to the weeping- Ezra encourages the people not to weep- but instead instructs them to go home drink wine, eat rich yummy foods and remember that the “Joy of the Lord is our Strength” ....

And If this was the end of Nehemiah... You would think it all worked out and that even though there was struggle and hardship and weeping- the people persevered, and this was indeed God’s restoration... but sadly... chapter 8 is not the end of the story.... Rather the book ends with each of the goals accomplished: temple, law, and wall- breaking down and not working out... the book literally ends with Nehemiah yelling and cursing at the people- he even goes as far as hitting a person and then pulls the hair of another person.... not an advisable action for any Pastor..... So in our text today we read about this one day full of hope and potential... but that day does not prevail... Which may leave you wondering, why is this book even included in the Bible? What can I possibly learn from this- “Layne...” let’s just go back to overlooking this story and move on to more productive texts. And yet.... I want to suggest, that the fact that this book is in the Bible tells us that failure (or things not going as planned, or a hope being deferred) is a part of our walk of faith. That even when we have the best of intentions- we may do it wrong... we might miss the mark on God’s intentions for us... but nonetheless God is still with us in the failure.

Many of you know that before coming to Lewinsville Presbyterian Church that I was the pastor of Hagar’s Community Church which was a congregation planted on the inside of the Washington Correction Center for Women- which is the largest women’s prison in Washington State. In my own self-reflection I have realized that I don’t talk much about Hagar’s Community Church- and the truth is because I have incredibly complicated feelings about my time in PNW and working within the structure of a Prison.... As you can most likely imagine it was a hard place to do ministry.

When I arrived in Tacoma there was a lot of excitement about starting this congregation. The presbytery who called me to begin this ministry had really taken a risk to do a really different and radical ministry and so there was a lot of pomp and circumstance around its beginnings- and to be honest, I felt this pressure to “make it great” make it a joyful... Make a Prison Church feel like the coolest thing anyone has ever hear of! I felt a big burden to only highlight the positives and I certainly fell into the trap of reporting on the numbers... anyone who asked about Hagar’s I would quickly tell them about how the church is rapidly growing! We

baptized 16 people at one worship service! I also personally just wanted Hagar's Community Church to be the opposite of anyone's notion of what a prison congregation would be like... For me that was a part of giving dignity to these women who in so many other aspects of their life experienced devastating dehumanization.

And it was easy to make it sound great- the church did grow rapidly... for a while we had 100% growth from week to week- 2 became 4, 4 became 8, 8 became 16, 16 became 32 and on and on.... any pastor would be delighted= we went from 2 people on the first night to 150 in less six months... Along with worship we had six small groups meeting throughout the week... we had weekly bible study- and the women who attended Bible study showed up every week with the most intense curiosity about the Bible... These women kept me on my toes, and I always had to know my stuff before leading in Bible Study (obviously we never read Nehemiah together) ... it was a pastor's dream to have such dedicated members to learning about the Bible.... And truthfully... In so many ways Hagar's Community Church was a pastor's dream congregation.

But... If I'm being incredibly honest... it was a church in a prison... and it was complicated... every week was a new complicated situation for a variety of reasons.... there was an underbelly to the whole thing that was difficult to articulate or convey.... The hard stuff often caught swept under the rug... and I just leaned in to all the pomp and circumstance built around it... And then.... On the third Saturday of January 2020 - on what was our 1 year anniversary as a congregation- the thing I feared most happened. I had planned an incredibly celebratory worship service and planned for us to look back on our year together and to celebrate all that God had given us. Weekly worship happened every Saturday evening promptly at 1920 (prisons are on military time) and on this particular night the chapel flooded with women- word was out that we were having a "fun" worship service. As was my typical practice, after everyone entered the room, I would walk to the front of the chapel to ring a bell- signaling that it was time for the service to begin- and time to be quiet. And just as I began to ring the bell.. I saw a flash to my left.. And quickly realized that there was a fight happening. Worst.Case.Scenario... I quickly notified the chapel officer who was in the hallway... who then quickly called for backup on his radio... and within minutes the room was filled with correction officers who were subduing the fight (which frankly is fairly violent thing to witness) , and my congregation had been "ordered to the wall" meaning the sergeant had ordered everyone to have their face (nose) touching the wall and mouths shut. And I was left standing there in the middle of the room watching the fighters get cuffed- all while continuing to scream x rated insults at each other- who were then were escorted to "seg"... prison slang for solitary confinement. It's safe to say... this is NOT how I had hoped to celebrate our 1-year anniversary as a congregation.

This event took a while for me to move past... and truthfully, I'm not sure I have fully moved past it- for weeks I was haunted by the images of the violence I witnessed...I realized how lucky I was that no more than two people had participated in the fight.... and for the first time since beginning my work at the WCCW I was scared- I wasn't scared for my personal safety, but I was scared that the worshipping community I had built could cause harm.... Had I

unintentionally created a situation that was unsafe... did I somehow put my congregation at risk? Was our services too big, too free, too inviting... did I need to be tougher on behavior and begin limiting how many people could attend worship (such a large crowd is harder to manage)... were the two fighters allowed to come back to worship?

I felt as though I had failed... what I had intended to create, which came from the purest place of my heart..... I had the most loving and best intentions.... But what I had intended to create was not exactly what occurred- there was a certain naiveness that had caused me to ignore important data.... and there was a need to reevaluate... rethink things... ask God to intervene... and step one for me in that re-creation was to admit to failure. And I can tell you that God did meet me there- in my post failure circumstances God found me and led Hagar's Community Church towards a new way of being that was much healthier and sustainable. I found myself relying more steadily on God's direction... praying more often... and more willing to lead from a sense of humility... rather than a place of arrogance, whereas before it was all about how great this thing was.... And after the fight... it became God how might I follow you to lead this congregation into your hands. It wasn't about the accolades, but about God's spirit being made real within the walls of a prison.

Friends.... Our Congregation is standing at a precipice.... We can look out and see upon the horizon many new things coming our way.... We are awaiting that glorious day when the global pandemic is officially behind us- putting an end to our own sort of exile that has full of isolation and separation and grief.... And the excitement is palpable as we await the completion of our building renovations which are just around the corner... and to be certain... we will all walk together hand in hand in the glory of that day... trumpets just might be played... and choirs will sing... and we just might weep from the joy of it all! It will be exciting, and full of newness, and I do not think we will end up in place similar to Nehemiah at the end of his book..... But ... in the midst of all the excitement and joy.... let us keep our feet on the ground.... Our hearts and ears open to God's guidance.... And our wits about us.... And let us have the ability to remain humble to God's instruction as we move into a new and unknown future... so that even in the midst of all that excitement... we might still acknowledge and learn from ups and downs and struggles that we most certainly encounter... because we are human.

Admitting to failure and learning from it- is not the easiest of spiritual practices.... And yet... Let us learn from Ezra and Nehemiah that failure, missing the mark, is a part of the life of faith. Which is why these books are in our bible. It would be false to think that we can go on and always be perfect and always have the best plans and so not only do we need to learn from our failures, but we need to be prepared that sometimes no matter the best of our intentions our plans are not going to go as planned or as we hoped... And the good news is that God is with us even in those times. We do not need to be ashamed of failures or fearful of admitting when things are not working. God is bigger than the failure... and The Holy Spirit is able to transform anything into Good News. Amen

**Let Us Pray:**

Holy God, As move forward into a new day bring to our minds the truth Your compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Gracious God, Be our portion- and our guide. Amen