

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(April 8, 2018)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

What a Mess

(Introduction; Nehemiah 1:1-4)

Study #1

Introduction: Taking a mulligan...

When I was younger, I spent a lot of time on the golf course where I learned the game and the language of golf.

I can talk birdies and bogeys, eagles and pars. I can discuss slices and hooks and fades, putts and drives, chips and sand traps, even Golden Bears and Tigers.

My time playing golf also taught me about *mulligans*.

A mulligan is a shot a golfer may take when he's out with friends - never in a tournament. He takes a mulligan when he wants to re-take a shot to improve his position on the course.

If his first shot didn't go exactly where he wanted it to go, he'll "take a mulligan" and have another go at it.

Visionary messages...

You might say that today's message is something of a mulligan.

Back in February, Jeff and I gave a series of messages that focused on our church's Mission and Vision.

One of those messages had to do with Northwest's vision that we would be a church of impact.

The way we say it around here is "impact disproportionate to size." The thought is that a church - of whatever size - can have such impact that everyone who's watching what is happening will recognize that God is at work.

A church of dozens of people will impact hundreds. A church of hundreds impacts tens of thousands. A church of thousands transforms a city.

My February message focused on the kinds of things any one of us might do that will have such impact that everyone watching will marvel - that must have been God at work!

In other words, I applied the "impact disproportionate to size" idea to individuals, not so much to our church.

That's not to say that a message given to inspire you, individually, was bad. In fact, I think it's a great thing when any of us catch the vision of God using us in a powerful way.

But I'd like to use this morning to shift focus from the individual to the congregational. I'm using today and the weeks that follow to improve our church's position on the course God has for us.

So, today, I'm going to take a mulligan.

I want to paint a picture (cast a vision) of us - TOGETHER - making impact disproportionate to our size, our makeup, our gifts, talents, abilities, so that everyone who is watching what is happening will say, "*Wow. Look at what God is doing!*"

We've looked at "I". Now we're looking at "us". We've seen "me". In the weeks ahead, we'll see "we". Without question, "WE" is more powerful than "ME".

I/Me/You vs Us/We...

Every team in the NBA wants the superstar. Tim and time again, though, we have watched as a *team* made up of skilled, selfless role players all aiming at the same goal defeat the superstar's squad.

A trained, elite soldier can do a lot of damage to an enemy. But it is the trained and dedicated unit all pointed in the same direction that wins the day.

And if one Christ-follower on mission for the Great Commission is a powerful witness, how much more when an entire body of Christ-followers is on mission?

Our Mission Statement envisions everyone who is a part of Northwest taking next steps with Jesus AND helping others take next steps with Him.

If a few of us are next-stepping with Jesus through life, there will be impact. If a lot of us are, there is more impact. But if the culture of our church is such that all of us are on a next-step journey, I believe the Lord will use us to make unforgettable - disproportionate - impact.

- Our Sunday mornings here will become increasingly rich as we tell each other of God-sightings from the week.
- Our neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools will be mission fields that we penetrate like yeast mixed in to a lump of dough.
- We'll salt Northwest San Antonio with the Gospel.
- We'll have a part to play in making Jesus famous in our city.
- And other tribes, tongues, people, and nations will hear when we're ALL on mission.

This vision of each of us walking with Jesus, all of us serving in any of the ways in which we might serve in Jesus' Name, all of us consumed with passion for Jesus, is what has turned my attention to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.

This book shows the people of God, inspired by a vision for the glory of God, accomplishing tremendous things for God, together.

It shows us a very ordinary (maybe even under-ordinary) people doing more than their enemies - and even they themselves - dreamed they could - and quickly.

The book of Nehemiah revolves around the acts of one Jewish man, Nehemiah, and the people with whom he lived in Jerusalem in the 5th century BC.

But we won't "get" the action of this book without a bit of background. So, here's the essential lead-up to Nehemiah's story you need to know.

Setting the Scene: Israel's History (at a glance)

****Abraham and the patriarchs*

The beginning of the story of God's work in establishing the nation of Israel dates to somewhere around 2,000 BC. That's when He called Abraham¹ to move from his home in the land of the Chaldeans² to the land of Canaan.

God gave Abraham tremendous promises of a beautiful land, a mighty nation, and blessing to the whole world through his descendants. Over a long life, Abraham learned to trust God.

But his descendants - Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons - weren't the men of faith Abraham had been. In fact, there was a rapid descent, morally and spiritually, in the generations after Abraham.

So, to protect the family of Abraham, God arranged for His people to be deported for a few hundred years of safekeeping in Egypt.

****Egyptian bondage, Exodus, wilderness*

¹ His name at first was "Abram".

² This is ancient Babylon, in present-day Iraq.

While they were enslaved in Egypt, God's people were being formed into a great nation. Finally, after four long centuries of bondage, God delivered them from Egypt through the Red Sea at the Exodus.³

Following a generation's worth of wandering around in the wilderness on the other side of the Red Sea, God allowed His people to enter the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

****Conquest, the Judges*

Led by Joshua, they entered Canaan. The generation that took Canaan was marked by courageous faith. But, from Joshua forward, Israel's history was a roller-coaster of spiritual ups and downs, with way more downs than ups.

The Jews' early vibrant faith was replaced by widespread apostasy during the reign of the Judges.

Finally, God found a young man who would rule as a righteous and just king over the nation. That king was David.

****King David, King Solomon*

Under David, military might, political clout, international respect, and great wealth came to Israel. And, when David died, he left the kingdom of Israel in the capable hands of his son, Solomon.

During Solomon's reign, Israel prospered in every way and became a beacon to the nations of the glory and majesty of God.

This majesty was seen, more clearly than anywhere else, in the temple Solomon built for the Lord.

THE SOLOMONIC TEMPLE

³ This event, the Exodus, is the highlight display of God's power in the Old Testament. It was the event that birthed the nation of Israel and is a milestone remembered by Jews to this day.

I'm not going to go into detail to describe the Solomonic Temple. Suffice it to say that it was a glorious building made to honor the Lord. You can read about it in 1 Kings, chapter 6.⁴ It was a very impressive building.

And then, of course, there was the royal palace Solomon built for himself, which was no slouch of a structure, either.

THE SOLOMONIC PALACE

One of the rooms in the House of the Forest of Lebanon (built with cedars from Lebanon), was a great banquet hall sixty yards long.

The throne in the grand throne room was made of ivory and overlaid with gold. On either side of the six steps leading up to the throne were carved, life-sized models of lions.

The age of Solomon was a golden age in which Israel was the Middle East's superpower.

The grandeur of his palace, his wealth and military might, his wisdom, and, of course, the temple, elevated Israel in the eyes of the nations of the world.

However, toward the latter end of Solomon's reign, the king known for his wisdom turned to foolishness and followed other gods.

****Israel's post-Solomon decline*

⁴ Solomon carried out his father, David's instructions perfectly, using heavy taxation and forced labor (150,000 men) to get the work done. The temple proper was 180x35 feet and the inside was overlaid with gold throughout. All the wood trim work was in aromatic cypress or cedar wood and the doors were made from the beautiful wood of the olive tree. The "bronze sea", which held more than 10,000 gallons of water, was located in the outer court of the temple (in which the priests would perform all the ceremonial washings) and stood on the backs of twelve oxen cast in bronze. There were (literally) tons of bronze utensils, other basins, and bronze work throughout the temple precincts. And then, in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, called the Holy of Holies, there were two carved angels (cherubim) made of olive wood, overlaid with gold, having wingspans of fifteen feet apiece.

Solomon engaged in idolatry and immorality, injustice and great wickedness.

And from Solomon forward, to trace the path of Israel is to trace a path to national self-destruction.⁵

After nearly two centuries of unrelenting apostasy, the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BC.

And, not long after that (in 586 BC), the Southern Kingdom of Judah - which was where the capitol city of Jerusalem was located - fell to the Babylonians (the king was Nebuchadnezzar).

Solomon's magnificent temple was destroyed. Many of the wealthiest and most influential citizens were deported to Babylon. The walls that protected Jerusalem were flattened.

The destruction of Jerusalem was, for the Jews, a devastating thing.

In the US, what happened on September 11, 2001 was awful for us Americans. But those tragedies are different from what the Jews felt at the destruction of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was more than a city. It was God's city. And the temple wasn't just a building. It was God's house.

However, because God's promises stand, the destruction of the temple and the city was not the end of the nation of Israel.

The Jews remained a people, even following the Babylonian invasion.

Those who had been left behind in Palestine clung to the old ways. And those in captivity never forgot that they were God's people. Many of them lived for the chance to return to the promised land.

⁵ During the reign of the next king after Solomon (Rehoboam), the unified people of God split into two factions, dividing into northern (Israel) and southern kingdoms (Judah).

Seventy years after Jerusalem's collapse, they got that chance.

****Babylon's end; Persia's rise and King Cyrus' new policies*

Fifty years after destroying Jerusalem, Babylon itself was destroyed by the Medo-Persian Empire. (539 B.C)⁶ That meant that Jews who had been living in lands ruled by Babylon were now living in lands ruled by Persia.⁷

Persia's world dominance provided opportunities for the dispersed Jews to return and to restore the land of Palestine.

The first Persian king was Cyrus. Cyrus not only allowed, he *encouraged* the Jews to return to their homeland. Under Cyrus' direction, some 50,000 Jews returned.

Cyrus further encouraged the Jews to rebuild the temple. And, under the direction of a man named Zerubbabel, seventy years after its destruction, the temple was rebuilt. (516 BC)

During the reigns of three other kings who followed Cyrus (Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes), the Jews continued to live in Israel in peace, re-populating, restoring, re-building.

Then, about sixty years after the temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel, the 4th king after Cyrus - Artaxerxes - allowed a Jewish scribe named Ezra to return to Jerusalem with another group of some 5,000 Jews to re-establish worship in Jerusalem (about 458 B.C.).⁸

So, to review. Destruction came in 586 B.C. Then, seventy years of captivity. Then, many Jews returned and rebuilt the Temple. Then,

⁶The Persian Empire lasted another couple of centuries until they were defeated by Alexander the Great's armies in about 333 BC.

⁷ The vast Medo-Persian empire covered some two million square miles (of which Judah was a very small part), including the present-day countries of Egypt, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey.

⁸The Hebrew Bible doesn't separate Ezra and Nehemiah, but treats them as one.

sixty years later, Ezra went to Israel to put the nation back on track, spiritually.

Things are looking up for the people of God!

Then, around 448 B.C. one hundred and forty years after the destruction of the city, we are introduced to the man we will come to love in the coming weeks: Nehemiah.

Drama in Susa, Persia! (1:1-3)

Meet Nehemiah! (v. 1)

[1:1] The words of Nehemiah⁹ the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol

Nehemiah was a descendant of one of the Jews who had been exiled from Jerusalem when it had been sacked by Babylon.

Nehemiah was probably a 5th or 6th generation exile. His family had lived away from Israel for at least one hundred and forty years.

One hundred and forty years ago (1878), one of my great-great grandmothers was a young woman whose parents had arrived in America from England. My great-great grandfather and his family lived in the wilds of Kentucky.

Today, I don't long to go back "home" to Kentucky or to the UK. I'm only a third generation Texan and consider myself "Texan" through and through.

I suspect that you don't feel a tremendous kinship to your 5th of 6th generation-removed ancestral homeland.

But it wasn't like that for Jews.

⁹ From elsewhere in the book, we discover that Nehemiah came from the tribe of Judah, and (from chapter 2) that he had a prestigious role in the palace as the cupbearer to the king. His name means "*the consolation of YHWH.*"

Jews like Nehemiah had never lived anywhere but Persia - nor had his parents or grandparents or great-grandparents - yet he was still a Jew, still a citizen of Israel.

His identity was tied to the nation and to the nation's land: Palestine, given to them when God gave promises to Abraham. Even though he lived in Susa, Persia, his heart was in Palestine.¹⁰

In Persia, Nehemiah was a part of a subservient population. He was a Jew, and the Jews were a conquered people.

That reference to "*the twentieth year*" in verse 1 means that Nehemiah is writing about events that began at the twenty-year point of the reign of Artaxerxes. This is little more than a dozen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem.¹¹

Something happened during that twentieth year that changed the trajectory of his life. He received visitors, Jews who had come from Israel.

"Tell me. How are things back home?" (v. 2)

Meet Hanani

Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, was one of the visitors.¹² Hanani came with others from Judah, with news from "home."

Again, even for those Jews who had been in captivity for generations and had never set foot on Promised Land soil, the land of Israel was always "home."

¹⁰ For a point of reference, Susa, where Nehemiah was living, was located very near the present-day Iran/Iraq border, near the Tigris River.

¹¹ From one of my sources: Cyrus was a tolerant, good, enlightened king who allowed conquered peoples to return to their homelands. He also allowed freedom of worship in conquered lands. His descendant, on the other hand, Artaxerxes, was a fickle, arrogant, unreliable spendthrift! (And this Artaxerxes was the King Nehemiah would have to deal with)

¹² We will meet Hanani again in chapter 7.

Nehemiah asked Hanani the question that was most on his heart, and at the forefront of his mind.

Nehemiah poses "The Question"

[1:2b]...I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

Nehemiah knew Israel's ancient and recent history. He knew about Abraham and Moses and the Exodus. He knew about the glory days of David and Solomon and Solomon's Temple.

He, knew, too, about the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. His parents and grandparents would have told him all about that.

But he also knew about the return of the Jews at the order of Cyrus. He knew about the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel.

He knew about the return of thousands more with Ezra just a few years earlier.¹³

Nehemiah had every reason to believe that things were going GREAT in Israel, that God's people were prospering, that Solomon's days were returning, that God's purposes were moving forward.

It's easy to understand Nehemiah's ignorance, in those days before modern communication. He was separated from Jerusalem by eight hundred miles. There might not have been reports in years.

So, he asked his question. Hanani and those with him answered.

"Nehemiah, You Wouldn't Believe It!" (v. 3)

[1:3] They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and

the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

Nehemiah is faced with the wreckage

One hundred and forty years have passed and the walls are still down. The city is still in shambles.

Can you imagine being a New Yorker and seeing the damage done on 9/11? Can you imagine leaving New York while it was still a mess and returning twenty-five or fifty years later and finding the rubble of the Twin Towers still lying on the ground?

What would be the thoughts of every New Yorker as she or he walked past "ground zero" if in 2151 there was not a beautiful memorial park, two large pools with waterfalls, a stunning museum, and a brand-new tower?

It would mean humiliation.

Nehemiah listened as his brother, Hanani, told him of the deplorable conditions in which the Jews were living.

We can imagine the scene...

- People had to walk over the wreckage of the gates to enter the city.
- Traders laughed as they climbed over the broken-down walls.
- Children played with rusty gate hinges they found lying around.
- Enemies mocked the defenseless city; nobody took Jerusalem seriously, because without locked gates and solid walls a city was nothing more than a village waiting to be sacked.

And this is the state of Jerusalem. Not just any city - God's city!

Jerusalem was to be glorious and majestic and God-honoring, a beacon to the surrounding nations, a light to the world advertising the greatness of God.

Not this!

¹³ Maybe he hadn't heard that Ezra's (illegal) attempt to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem had failed, a dozen years earlier.

The city was to command respect among the nations and the Jews in Jerusalem were to be about the work of God - neither of which would happen with a torn-down wall.

Notice that Hanani didn't sugarcoat his report. He told it to Nehemiah straight up. *"My brother, the place is a wreck. It's a mess."*

It takes guts to tell it like it is. And it will require something from Nehemiah to take it all in. And he does take it all in.

As we move through the story of Nehemiah, we'll be amazed to see how he and the people in Jerusalem respond. It's exciting and inspiring to see what they accomplish.

Before action, though, there has to be a sober and a realistic look at what is. No pretending. No denying.

For one hundred and forty years, the Jews in Jerusalem tiptoed around the wreckage, hopped over broken-down walls while enemies mocked, and thought, *"It's not that bad."*

Nehemiah may have been the first to hear how things were and to have thought, *"This is an unmitigated disaster."*

We'll see Nehemiah's response shortly, but I first want us to go to Hanani and ask him for a customized report.

Here's my question to Hanani for us, today.

"So, how are things here? God has placed us in San Antonio. We have been blessed to be a blessing, to shine light into darkness and to be salt and leaven, meeting needs in Jesus' Name. So, how are things here, really?"

I think that Hanani would point out broken walls. First, and most importantly, broken walls on the spiritual front.

Nehemiah invites us to face our 2018 wreckage

***Spiritual wreckage, here

There are people we know and love who are far from God.

There are increasing numbers of people who identify as religious "nones" - no religious affiliation. They are raising families. Their children have no religious foundation.

Within a stone's throw of our church are several healthy churches. 78250 is a Gospel-rich zip code. There are other areas of San Antonio that are not so Gospel-rich. There are large sections of our city that lack Gospel witness.

Schools are populated by children who need Jesus. Speak with LeRoy Jacobson for five minutes and listen as he tells you about kids at High Schools and Middle Schools in Northwest San Antonio. There's a lot of confusion and loneliness and Jesus-lessness on these campuses.

Hanani would go on to point out other broken-down walls.

***Personal wreckage, here

He would point to domestic abuse and to systemic poverty.

He would point out challenges in homes and to families.

He would open our eyes to what life is like behind bars in our city and county jails.

Hanani would be sure to remind us of the addiction problem in our city. According to recent reports from the DEA, the most abused drugs in San Antonio are methamphetamines. But heroin use is also on the rise, especially among the young. And obviously, alcohol is still a very large problem.

He would tell stories of human trafficking and of women trapped in the sex trades.

Hanani would probably take a few minutes and speak of wreckage outside of San Antonio.

***Wreckage, there

He would point to Gospel-poor areas of the larger 2018 world, places where people will never hear of Jesus unless people with resources go or send others to go.

He would tell stories of courageous and faithful Christians who are suffering persecution. Our family is suffering.

He would tell us of widespread, extreme poverty, disease, and slavery.

It's enough to take our breath away. So much wreckage. It's hard to take in - and we're tempted to look away. We want to tell Hanani, "Enough!"

But, we have one more question to ask him.

"Brother, we understand that Jesus gave us a commission. What is your assessment of the state of that mission here? Tell it to us straight. Are we guilty of ignoring the wreckage outside where we could be making a difference in Jesus' Name?"

***Wreckage, within

In asking the question, I'm aware that I'm inviting messiness into our Sunday morning. And I want to be clear that I'm not asking that we start complaining about our church.

I've long treasured the advice of the German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who once said, *"Never complain against the church. The church is Christ's bride and He doesn't take kindly to complaints against His bride."*

Nor do I much value the gift of seeing problems. The gift of identifying problems is a cheap gift. And no matter where we look, there will always be something wrong with everything.

But Nehemiah wanted to know how things *really* were in Jerusalem. And in the spirit of not pretending and not denying, I wonder if Hanani would point to wreckage and rubble, right here.

Now, I love our church and I rejoice over the wonderful things that the Lord is doing in and through us in these days.

But...

Are we taking next steps with Jesus and helping others take next steps with Him? (Think of your life as a disciple; your opportunities to lovingly press Jesus into the lives of your friends.)

Are we passionately pursuing life-changing relationships? (Think hospitality here and at home; think of your current experience of community.)

Are we asking God to do the things that only He can do when we ask Him? (Think of your experiences of prayer alone and with others.)

Are we bringing our friends to Jesus? (Think of the wreckage we just named. Could we do more to touch that need with Jesus' love?)

It's all sobering.

We've looked out through a window to see wreckage outside, and we've looked through a mirror and gotten an eyeful of wreckage here.

What do we do now? Well, what did Nehemiah do when he learned of the wreckage in his beloved Jerusalem?

Responding to the Wreckage

[1:4] When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah Weeps and Mourns, Fasts and Prays

Initially, Nehemiah took no action. He and his people will take action. Strong action. But not now. Not yet.

He didn't make one move to remedy the situation.

He simply entered into the reality of how bad things were, expressed his grief and broken-heartedness, and mourned, prayed, and fasted, as he says, ***"for days."***

We will see next Sunday that this period of mourning actually lasted for months.

That's what Nehemiah did.

What about us? How should we, the people of God today, respond to the wreckage all around us?

And We...?

The time will come for action. But, I'm not urging that now. One step at a time. Let's follow Nehemiah's lead.

Let's allow the wreckage we have seen to wreck us, believing that God's method is to use wrecked people and wrecked groups of people to restore and to rebuild the wreckage around them.

Today, Nehemiah invites us to join him in a journey of unforgettable impact for God and His purposes. The first step on that journey involves opening our eyes to the mess before us.