

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision
(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Seeing in the Dark

(Nehemiah 2:9-17a)

Study #4

Introduction: Planning an invasion while being invaded...

Several recently-released movies are telling some of the stories of World War II, focusing on Great Britain's experience in that war.

I haven't seen all of these, but I'm thinking of *Churchill* and *The Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk* (really inspiring) and *Their Finest*.

It's no surprise that the Prime Minister at that time, Winston Churchill, is a major figure in these movies. But the plot lines don't only revolve around Churchill. They are concerned to tell about other leaders and about the courage of the British people, generally.

So, in honor of these movies, put yourself in London in the Fall of 1940. You are enduring "Operation Sea Lion", a two-months long, nightly attack of London by the German Air Force (Luftwaffe). During "Sea Lion" two hundred planes dropped thousands of bombs on London for fifty-seven straight nights, causing terrible damage.

During the daytime hours of those two months, Londoners would see Churchill picking his way through the previous night's rubble, always dressed in his suit and derby hat, chomping his cigar, encouraging people he met.

And what was Churchill doing and what was his staff doing during the interminable nighttime bombings?

Historians tell us that every night, in a bomb shelter below Piccadilly Circus, they were poring over maps of Europe, planning the invasion of Germany.

That's right. When all evidence pointed to defeat, they were planning an invasion while being invaded.

By day, they saw the same bombed-out buildings everybody else saw. Every night, they envisioned something beyond the bombing. They saw a glorious future and a victory, and they put together a bold plan to bring that victory about.

Churchill, other leaders, the British people, and the Allies all saw that Europe had to be freed from Nazi tyranny. And, fueled by that vision to stop the Nazis and to stop Hitler, they did it.

Vision fuels mission. It did for the Allies in World War II and it did for the first Christians, too.

Jesus' commission to the first disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)

When Jesus looked out at the people who followed Him, He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Lost. Hopeless. Alienated from God.

And, since He was the Good Shepherd, He was committed to living and dying for all of us sheep.

His post-resurrection strategy for bringing people to God was to give His first disciples a Great Commission.

Despite the many, many missteps of these disciples over the three years He was with them, Jesus gave them this commission to spread the news that life and forgiveness and purpose and meaning can only be found in a trusting relationship with Him.

He gave this Commission from a mountaintop in Galilee.

[Matthew 28:18] "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus knew that the Holy Spirit's power, coupled with the disciples' ownership of the vision, would enable them to accomplish the mission.

Now, fast-forward two thousand years to today, to 2018.

Jesus' Great Commission to us

The first disciples' Great Commission is now ours. The Great Commission is an ages-long Commission. And the world in which we live is every bit as needy for what Jesus offers as was that first world.

In 1940, bombs dropped all night long over London. Bombs of different kinds faced the first disciples, while we face our own, varied bombs today, right where we live.

Families face bombs. Marriages struggle and parenting is tough - and there's nothing new there. But, over-busy schedules coupled with challenging cultural changes make intimate marriages and great parenting much more difficult.

There is the bomb of an increasing array of potential spiritual expressions. It's confusing to lots of people. Today, in the minds of many, Christianity is nothing more than one option among many, and many are choosing "none."

The tech bomb has come with fantastic upsides and some undeniable downsides. Technology has improved our lives in countless ways.

But we all recognize the challenges to personal relationships that come with ever-present devices, the intrusiveness of social media, the damage being done by pornography.

The Old Testament hero, Daniel, lived for God in the land of Babylon, and the bombs that are falling today are turning our world into a modern-day Babylon. We struggle to shine and to stay "on mission" for Jesus' Great Commission in Babylon.

Jesus' church has been impacted by all the bombs I've mentioned. And some bombs are specifically hitting congregations. Like ours.

You and I are commanded to love each other. But we may be tempted to allow differences to divide us. We may schedule "me time" to the exclusion of "connect time". In the absence of face-to-face relating, we get suspicious. Hypersensitive. Insensitive. Resentful. Cliques form. On go the masks.

This only scratches the surface, and I could go on. But the point is clear. The bombs are falling hard and fast.

So, in the Fall of 1940, while the bombs dropped, England's leaders planned an invasion of Nazi Germany.

And today, Jesus calls us to counterpunch in response to the bombs falling all around us with the weapons of prayer, love and grace, truth and righteousness, faith, and the good news of Jesus.

His Great Commission is a call to us to make disciples out of bomb victims. We are to introduce people to life in Jesus, show them His new way, invite them on to the path of recovery.

We are neither more nor less adequate for the task than Peter and John and Thomas were twenty centuries ago. And now is the time, while the bombs are falling, to plan for a loving, redemptive advance for Jesus' sake.

Fortunately, our Bibles tell us of a man and a people who fought against the bombs of their day with tenacity. The man is Nehemiah and the people are the Jews in Jerusalem of the 5th century, BC.

Nehemiah was an Old Testament Jew who lived twenty-five hundred years ago. But his story speaks with great relevance to our church.

Nehemiah's preparation (Nehemiah 1:1--2:8)

And here's what I see as the most relevant nugget for us.

His story tells us that when, we, Jesus' followers, **[2:18] put [our] hands to the good work**, great things can be accomplished for Him - and quickly.

Nehemiah was a servant of the king of Persia in the winter palace in Susa when he was confronted with the awful news of how bad things were back home in Palestine.

Jerusalem's walls and gates were still down, a century and a half after they had been destroyed by Babylon. His Jewish brothers and sisters were depressed and had become laughingstocks. (1:3)

Nehemiah was devastated by the news. But, being the personal cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, he couldn't just stop to take time to grieve. He kept serving, faithfully, day in and day out.

Over the five months following the report from his brother, Hanani, He wept and mourned. Then he fasted and prayed. Then he planned. There in Susa, he developed a vision for the restoration of Jerusalem eight hundred miles away.

When the day came that he could no longer contain his grief in the presence of the king - a crime punishable by death! - Nehemiah spilled the beans.

[2:3]...“Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?”

No vision moves ahead until someone sticks his or her neck out. And by those words, Nehemiah placed his neck on the chopping block.

And when, against all expectations, the king asked, **[2:4] “What would you request?”** - Nehemiah was off to the races with requests for everything he would need to accomplish this great vision.

We might have thought, *“Luck to you, Nehemiah. Your vision's fulfillment is dependent on the unlikely compassion of a tyrant.”*

But the king said, “Yes”! and Nehemiah explains that the king said “Yes” (1:4) **[8b]...BECAUSE the good hand of my God was upon me.**

After that dramatic scene in Artaxerxes' court, Nehemiah's story kicks into high gear. We next see him in transit, traveling from Susa to Jerusalem.

Reconnaissance (2:9-16)

From Susa, to Jerusalem (vv. 9-11)¹

A safe and uneventful journey (v. 9)

[2:9] Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

He was carrying the letters guaranteeing safe passage through dangerous lands. He was also probably carrying the letter he would present to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest to buy supplies for the construction projects. And you'll notice, too, that the king had provided military support.

After an uneventful trip, he and the group with him arrived, safe and sound, in Jerusalem.² I'll draw your attention, though, to what we read as he and his team pulled into town. It's worth noting.

The first hint of opposition... (v. 10)

[2:10] When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite³ official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

¹ We learn later in the book that Nehemiah was appointed the Governor of the Province of Judah at the time that he left Artaxerxes' winter palace in Susa.

² How long might it have taken to travel from Susa to Jerusalem? We must assume a number of months.

We'll see these guys again, at various points in the book. Sanballat and Tobiah are thorns in the Jews' sides throughout.

What we don't want to miss here, though, is that before any work is done, before anything even gets started in Jerusalem, it's clear that the path to a restored Jerusalem is not going to be a smooth one.

Note to self. When you ramp up your commitment to serve God, it will often feel like you are pushing something uphill.

God doesn't promise to protect you from exhaustion or from inconvenience as you serve. He doesn't even always protect against serious persecution and hardship. Service costs.⁴

And, note to church. As we ramp up our commitment here to the Great Commission with "next steps" and disciple-making, we can expect that the going won't always be smooth.

There will be times of disagreement about how we're going about doing what we're doing. About methods. Personalities may clash.

Expect that. So, we'll put on love, in advance. We'll treat each other with respect. Unity can thrive in the midst of disagreements.

We'll learn from each other and we'll remember that we're on the same team.

At other times, opposition may come from those who oppose exactly what we are trying to do. They will be "**very displeased.**"

In that case, we will continue to move forward, lovingly. We won't be contentious, but we won't stop contending for the faith. Our primary allegiance is to Jesus.

There. The appearance of Sanballat and Tobiah so early in the story of Nehemiah forewarns and forearms us.

Opposition may well come. When it comes, it doesn't mean that we're doing anything wrong. It may very well mean that we're doing things right.

Now, though, Nehemiah has reached his destination. We watch his entrance and his initial time in the city.

Three days to catch the "mood" of the place (v. 11)

[2:11] So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

He entered Jerusalem with no fanfare. He laid low. For an activist, laying low can be difficult. And it may be the most critical first step to take.

During these three days, we might have found Nehemiah sitting on park benches, watching, listening. We might have found him taking prayer walks through Jerusalem neighborhoods or wandering around in the temple, visiting public places, seeing the inner city.

During these three days Nehemiah would have picked up on the *mood*, the *feel*, of Jerusalem. After all, cities do have a *mood* to them.

I spent the summer of 1976 in Germany, serving with Greater Europe Mission. This was long before the Berlin Wall came down, so Germany was still divided, East and West.

On one long weekend, the team with which I was serving in West Germany took a trip to the city of Berlin, and, since Berlin was in East Germany, you had to travel through East Germany to get to West Berlin.

Berlin itself was also divided into East and West sections. We spent the bulk of our time in West Berlin, but we did cross over to spend one afternoon in East Berlin.

This was thirty years after the end of World War II.

³ We believe that these two men were probably influential chiefs of Israel's neighbors.

⁴ Similarly, if you choose to give more money to support God's work here at church, or to cross-cultural missions, or to meeting needs in Jesus' Name, you'll have less money to spend on yourself. Giving costs.

But, in the Soviet-controlled East Berlin we saw lots of places still bombed out from the war, the presence of the armed military everywhere, and an overpowering sense of despair and gloom.

We all noticed that people didn't give us eye contact on the streets. There was no music. We walked through the dull, drab grey streets of East Berlin.

On the other side of the Berlin Wall, though, West Berlin was a bright, light, friendly place. Music played and restaurants were open and buildings were new. It was a completely different mood.

What do you think was the "mood" of Nehemiah's Jerusalem? Happy go lucky and carefree? Optimistic about the future? I doubt it.

Spending three days taking in the sights of the city would have been a sobering experience. Coming to Jerusalem set Nehemiah down in a sad place.

Broken down walls. No gates. The city was vulnerable to attack and now he understood what Hanani meant when he had said that the people were "*in great distress and reproach.*" (1:3)

Nehemiah had to get a sense of the pulse, the mood, of the place before he could speak to the people. Those first three days were important days of orientation.

Now, let's get practical about us, here, today.

I've been using the term "view the wreckage" for a couple of Sundays. But I've been using that term in an abstract, "think about it" kind of way.

What would you see if you did more than think about the wreckage in your neighborhood? What would you see if you took a walking tour?

Would you accept an assignment, based on Nehemiah's story, to prayerfully walk through your neighborhood this week.? By yourself or with others, keeping your eyes and ears open.

For extra credit, would you take an hour - or more - to walk through or drive through a part of San Antonio you don't know?

You could go downtown. Especially during Fiesta! you'll find life and vitality and medals - and you'll find a dark side. There's a *mood* to The Pearl and the Riverwalk and to Alamo Heights and Terrell Hills.

There is also a *mood* to Palm Heights and to Wheatley Heights and to Eastlawn.

There is a *mood* to Northwest Community Church, and it varies from time to time and from setting to setting. Sometimes, we're vibrant and alive and sometimes we're not. We're friendly and warm and inviting and then, not so much. It's zealous for Jesus and on fire for His Great Commission, and then the fire cools.

Spend time exploring any place, any setting and you'll notice the spirit of the place. You'll find pessimism and low energy or a bright cheerfulness, hunger for God or a spirit of rebellion, apathy, fear.

And when we see, something inside of us stirs Seeing what *is* stirs vision of what *could be*. This week, take a walk. See. Allow the Holy Spirit to stir you by what you see.

Throughout those first three days, vision was growing in Nehemiah's heart for what could be in Jerusalem.

At the end of those days, or as a part of them, he knew that it was time for him to see the walls he had come to rebuild, up close and personal. He needed to have intimate knowledge of the carnage before he approached the people with a plan.

So, together with a few other men, he took a rough ride around the city.

The Rubble, Up Close and Personal (vv. 12-15)

[2:12] And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

[13] So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. [14] Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. [15] So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

We can picture him riding on top of rubble. It's unsteady footing with no good paths. He calls out a few of the landmarks. With a good map we would know his route. This is reconnaissance.

And why take this ride? Because, when it comes time to cast vision, Nehemiah has to have seen with his own eyes what the people have been living with. It's not time to launch anything until he's seen the wreckage himself.

Timing, Timing, Timing (v. 16)

[2:16] The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work.

Nobody knew what he was up to. There were no leaks. When it came time for him to speak publicly, it was going to be fresh, based on first-hand knowledge of the situation. He was going to spring his plan on the people as a surprise.

So, he's now been in town a few days. He's been around the block and he knows the score. He doesn't just have Hanani's second-hand report. He's seen the size and scope of the project. It's time to go public.

Calling an assembly of the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the citizens, he spoke in broad daylight. He's clearly out to inspire them to action.

A Vision Hatched in Darkness Sparks Action (2:17-20)

Nehemiah's Vision-Casting (v. 17-18a)

First, look at how things ARE (v. 17a)

[2:17a] Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire."

And we think, *"That Nehemiah, what a great motivator!"*

The first thing he does when he's got everybody together is point out how bad things are. It was a stroke of genius.

He had to do this, because the people of Jerusalem had to face the reality of their need before they would consider the challenge to change.

We think, *"But, they knew their need."*

Yes, of course, they knew that the walls were broken down. They knew that the gates that had protected the city had been lying on the ground in the ash heaps for a hundred and forty years.

They walked over the rubble every day on their way to their daily chores. They had all heard the jokes about *"ugly old Jerusalem."*

So, was it really necessary to remind them that the gates of the city had been burned by fire and that Jerusalem lay desolate?⁵

Yes, it was.

It was necessary because while everybody in Jerusalem knew the condition of the city, they were used to it. Broken-down walls and reproach and burned gates was *status quo*. It was normal.

⁵When Nehemiah calls the situation "bad" the word which we translate *bad* is elsewhere translated "evil" (Hebrew *ra*). There was something morally wrong with having the walls down, and God's city in disrepair.

It was all they and their parents and their grandparents had ever known.

Had Nehemiah started off by laying out grandiose plans for the rebuilding of the city, they might have dismissed him, *“What’s with this guy? We’re doing all right.”* - because, while “seeing” they didn’t really SEE and while they “knew” they didn’t really KNOW.

I “get” how a long-standing problem situation can be gotten used to.

When our three kids were young and growing, our house seemed to shrink. We added some square footage by selling a couch. And then we used the money we got from the sale of the couch to buy a little Sunfish sailboat, which we took out to Canyon or Medina Lake occasionally during the summer months for a few years.

That little sailboat went dormant a long time ago and has sat for years, unused.

I stowed it in a tucked away place outside at our house. It looked pretty terrible, but I got used to it. In fact - and this was NOT the case for Kathy - the longer it sat, the less I was bothered by it.

Well, a few weeks ago, I decided it was time to deal with the boat. I bought new tires for the trailer, cleaned it up and got it ready to sell. It took me three hours and twelve years. (Anybody want a boat?)

It’s easy to get used to the way things are.

When you travel to a country you’ve never seen, you’ll remark about the stunning architecture to a local and they look confused and surprised. It’s their normal.

Go to the mountains or to the beach. Marvel at the views. The ski lift operator of the guy who works at the marina hasn’t taken in the views for years. They’re used to it.

Messes that have been around for a long time become invisible.

That’s true in our homes and in our neighborhoods. It’s just as true in our schools and apartments, in the inner city.⁶

We just stop noticing. We don’t observe, until somebody has the guts to stand up and shout, **[2:17] “You see the bad situation we are in...”**

Nehemiah, confronting his fellow Jews with the reality that they were NOT doing all right, was the only loving thing to do.

He knew that until they faced the problem, there would never be change. Just about the most powerful change agent out there, the most effective impetus for change I know, is the pain of realizing that there’s a problem.

Complacency with the *status quo* would have meant no walls. Ever. So, Nehemiah upset the apple cart of complacency with bad news.

Conclusion:

It is just as critical that we, here today, move past complacency. And I propose that we do by following Nehemiah’s lead.

Following Nehemiah means opening our eyes. This week, would you take that hike on your street?

Take that drive to another part of town. Come up to church walk through empty classrooms here on a Thursday afternoon and imagine what goes on when the class is full. Walk across a college campus. Visit a hospital. A jail. A nursing home.

Take it all in and let God break your heart over the wreckage.

It’s the first step toward fulfilling the Great Commission mandate to make disciples out of bomb victims.

⁶ That’s why people coming back from trips to serve Jesus in another culture return with so many stories. Everything was so different *there* than *here*. Their eyes and ears and nostrils were open to take it all in.