

All In

Sermon text: Nehemiah 6:1-9

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I. Decision

Sometimes in life there are particular moments that have a powerful, shaping effect on everything that follows. You might call them “defining moments” or “turning points” or “forks in the road.” If you pause and think about it, you could probably come up with an example or two of a defining moment in your own life. There are several defining moments that come to mind for me.

I’ll do my best to describe one of them. It was a number of years ago – before I went to seminary, at a time when Cindy and I were active members of the First Presbyterian Church in Orlando. I had the opportunity to go on my first short-term mission trip with one of the Associate Pastors – a guy about my age who I really liked, as well as a few other people from our Sunday school class who I wanted to spend more time with. So we went down to the Merida, Mexico in the Yucatan Peninsula and spent a week working on the foundation for the chapel at San Pablo Presbyterian Seminary.

Now I enjoy working outside all day in blazing Yucatan sun as much as the next guy, but that wasn’t the part of the experience that was a defining moment for me. And I was able to sleep about as well as the rest of the team in our hammocks strung up outdoors with mosquitos buzzing in our ears all night, but that wasn’t my turning point experience either. What really made a difference for me was our team’s evening Bible discussions and group sharing times. More specifically, it was after one of our group meetings when each of us went out and found a quiet place to be alone with the Lord.

My place was next to a well in the center of the courtyard of the school where we were staying. I remember sitting on the edge of the well and looking up at the night sky. In that part of Merida, there were no streetlights so it was very dark. I could see as many stars as I’d ever seen before. For some reason, in that place, at that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of God’s presence; and not just his presence, but his nearness. I had an unmistakable sense that Jesus was right there with me, with us. And I knew then that being in ministry with brothers and sisters in Christ in Latin America was going to be an important part of my life. It was a defining moment in my relationship with Jesus.

If you’ve been here during our summer study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, then you can probably name the defining moment for the royal cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes I of Persia. In case you haven’t been here, it was the news Nehemiah received in the winter palace in Susa from his brother Hanani that Jerusalem, the city of their ancestors, was still in ruins nearly 150 years after it had been destroyed by the invading Babylonians. In response to that news, Nehemiah mourned, fasted, and prayed for four months. By the end of that time, God showed him that his call was to return to Jerusalem and lead the effort to rebuild the wall around the city.

As we have learned in recent weeks, that’s exactly what Nehemiah did. He risked his life in asking King Artaxerxes for a leave of absence from his job as royal cup-bearer. The king consented and sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem with building materials, a military escort, and a letter of introduction to other nobles who the royal cup-bearer would encounter along the way. Nevertheless, we heard last week how many of the non-Jewish leaders around Jerusalem actively

opposed the rebuilding of the wall. They tried to intimidate, undermine, and threaten the Jews who were doing the work. They might have succeeded in stopping the project, had it not been for Nehemiah's leadership and the implementation of his plan to provide protection for those who were working on the wall. That's what we talked about last week.

II. Discouragement

We learned that what enabled Nehemiah to lead so effectively was his clear sense of God's call that came from spending four months in prayer. So we pick up the story this week in chapter 6, where we heard how the opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem didn't end when Nehemiah armed the Jewish workers to ensure both their safety and the continuation of work on the project. In the verses we read this morning, we see that these enemies didn't cease their opposition, they simply changed tactics.

In chapter 4, they tried to discourage the Jews. They tried trash-talking. They tried threats of violence. But none of those attempts worked. As we heard in our passage today, the workers raised the wall to its full height – the only thing remaining was for the doors to be set in place on the gates all around Jerusalem. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem changed their tactics by going after Nehemiah personally. They summoned him to a meeting away from the city, at a location where Nehemiah would have to travel through lonely country to get there.

Their plan was to ambush and kill Nehemiah, and the cup-bearer knew it. He was no fool. Even though his enemies kept summoning him to meet over and over again, even though they “upped the ante” on the situation by sending an open letter that accused Nehemiah of trying to set himself up as king, even though they threatened to forward that letter to Artaxerxes; Nehemiah refused to go. I love the response he sent to them in verse 3: “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come and meet with you?” Nehemiah was “all in” on his commitment to the Lord to rebuild the wall.

But if we had read further in chapter 6, we would have heard that the intrigue didn't stop. Beginning in verse 10 is the account of a guy named Shemaiah, who invited Nehemiah into his house and then warned the royal cup-bearer that an attempt was going to be made to assassinate Nehemiah. Shemaiah told Nehemiah that they should go together into the temple and hide there for sanctuary – for protection against those who wanted to kill the cup-bearer. But Nehemiah discerned that Shemaiah had been hired by his Sanballat and Tobiah to convince the cup-bearer to act in a cowardly way and hide in the sanctuary. It would have undermined Nehemiah's leadership to hide in the temple while his workers were risking their lives to rebuild the wall.

Now a frontal assault from someone you know to be an enemy is one thing, but to have someone you should be able to trust – a fellow Jew, like Shemaiah, helping your enemies must have been a discouraging thing for Nehemiah. I think that discouragement is why we see him offering brief prayers throughout this sixth chapter. For example, in verse 9: “...But now, O God, strengthen my hands.” And in verse 14: “Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did...” It had to be discouraging for Nehemiah at times, even though he knew that God called him to lead the rebuilding of the wall.

III. Dedication

It has been discouraging for me at times, as well, in my call to be in ministry in Latin America. Over the years, the Lord shifted the focus of that call to Nicaragua. As I've shared before, initially we worked with Young Life in a city called Esteli after Hurricane Mitch devastated the area in October of 1998. Over time, some of the people we were supporting there

felt led to start a Presbyterian church there. So for several years we supported both Young Life and a new church development called Shalom Presbyterian Church. Other North Americans from other churches got involved with the ministry. There was drama and jealousy about funding and with who mission teams should work. There was gossip and lies and intrigue.

Can you believe that happened? I mean, here we were: brothers and sisters in Christ and we were fighting and criticizing and talking bad about each other – in two languages! Can you believe something like could happen among Christians? You may have heard of things like that at other churches, but we actually experienced it in this mix of mission relationships and it was so discouraging. It made me wonder if God was closing the door on my time in ministry there. Maybe, I thought, the Lord was using this bad behavior among brothers and sisters in Christ to move me along to some other place or some other mission partnership.

I think those are the kinds of questions we ask ourselves when we go through times of discouragement in our faith. Is this still the place for me? Does church really matter after all? Maybe we've gotten worn out from being over-committed at work, at home, in sports, in music, in community or church involvements. Maybe we've been hurt by a brother or sister in Christ treating us unkindly. Those times when we felt so close to Jesus in the past, that clear sense we had about the spiritual practices that helped us grow in our relationship with the Lord, the way coming to church and being in worship with our community of faith used to fill us up spiritually, how we found a place to serve where we could feel God using us to be a blessing to others, the joy we had in giving to support the ministry and mission of our church, those things just don't seem to be happening anymore and that adds to our discouragement.

Friends, those feelings of discouragement are real. They don't feel good. They should not be minimized or dismissed. But here's what I think Nehemiah has to teach us: neither should those feelings of discouragement take over and cause us to forget God's call on our lives. Sometimes what we need is to join the royal cup-bearer in his prayer from verse 9: "But now, O God, strengthen my hands." Sometimes the best response to a season of discouragement is to remember our call as followers of Jesus, and go "all in" for what the Lord is doing now.

As your pastor here at South Jax, I am "all in" for who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. And I need you to be "all in" with me. These are important days in the life of this church family. When you are in town and as long as your temperature is less than 100 degrees, we need you to be in worship. We need you to invest in relationships with brothers and sisters Christ here: even today consider inviting some folks to join you for brunch or lunch. We need you to be part of an existing Sunday school class, or start a new one, or volunteer to serve with our children or youth. We need you to participate in Wednesday evening meals, classes, small groups, and choirs starting in August. We need you to find a place of service where you experience joy in using your gifts and know that you are blessing others in Jesus' name. We need you to give, not only of your time, but also of your financial resources because we are not yet in a healthy place with our church finances. We need you to think creatively and act energetically to make South Jax the kind of church where you invite your friends without a church to come here with you. We need you to be "all in."

I can see it happening here and there already: in the energy and excitement about planning something new and different on Wednesday evenings for the fall; in small groups meeting in homes and sharing life in significant ways; in the passion to serve others in Jesus' name – right here in Jacksonville and faraway places too. It's happening here and there, but the question raised by Nehemiah's example is personal for each one of us: are you "all in?"