

Sunday, January 28/18

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Whitby

'Preparing the Way, Again'

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

1 Corinthians 1: 10-17

Breaking news: plans & events don't always go as planned: in spite of best intentions, the best of plans, and the best of people. In spite of beliefs which say we are all on the same page, have similar experiences & value systems. Even when the plans and intentions are developed and encouraged by a so-called or even a real expert. It's often akin to 'herding cats'.

We are surprised at outcomes: we look for answers, new strategies, someone to blame; a common denominator or universal truth: such is life-such is faith.

The scriptures are full of examples of God addressing a concern with His people, encouraging them in a plan for success, sending teachers, guides, and prophets: delivering them: but then, short memories, the grind or busyness of everyday life, a thousand opinions about what & who is right take over, doubt sets in: beliefs and directions become less clear: & the cycle repeats itself: the cycle of God caring for His creation and always delivering to them guidance, teachers, mentors, and a way out and a way forward: a way which is close to Himself & His ways; a way which leads to Himself in the shortest possible time-frame, given whatever individual or group He has to work with. Last week we heard about the Jonah story: which took longer than necessary: or did it? Maybe not: God builds in 'education & growth' time; 'personal reflection' time.

Over and over again: God is faithful God loves His creation God is our shepherd. God prepares the way forward: in His own time and way: & the time can be long the way is often puzzling and mysterious and anyone can find themselves as key players or as 'preparers of the way' for the so-called key players: are they any less 'key'? Moses never saw the promised land. Abraham never saw the realization of God's promise to create a great nation. Think about

Eli & Samuel; Andrew & Peter; John the Baptist & Jesus: John prepared the way for Jesus, but 'wasn't good enough to tie His sandals'.

Ezra & Nehemiah

Some background to prepare the way to today's reading from Nehemiah:

Judah and Israel had strayed: around 722 B.C. the judgment/consequences of living away from God and unfaithful to God's covenant: Assyrians Babylonians arrived, conquered, and scattered God's people: Jerusalem, the holy city, was, in the words of 1 commentator: 'sacked, destroyed, and virtually depopulated it'. God's people spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon.

The book of Ezra begins with the decree of Cyrus, a Persian king, to return God's people to Jerusalem and rebuild God's house: Zerubbabel and Joshua led the first return and rebuilt the temple. Ezra led the second return, and around 445 B.C., Nehemiah (the governor of Persian Judah; cupbearer and confidant of the king himself) leads the third return: to (wait for it) build a wall around Jerusalem.

So who was he? & how did God create the situation where He could use Nehemiah for this job? Obviously allowing a conquered city to rebuild its wall, could seem illogical & a less-than-desirable task for the person charged with organizing it: vocal opposition from the Persian side & many opinions from the Jerusalem side: the wall wasn't built in exactly the same place as before: think of the image that went around the internet last week where someone actually measured where the cut was in a sandwich and complained that the two halves were in fact: not.

But God, in His infinite love and plan for His people & Jerusalem raised up Nehemiah to become nothing less than the cup-bearer & confidant of the Persian king himself: Artaxerxes: whose step-mother was Esther. & he was a territorial governor, too: God could now use him to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, in spite of it's implications for Persian control of the city.

Further, leading up to our reading: is reading: the reading of God's word to the people: spiritual revival & a return to practicing their faith & living in greater communion with God, came in response to Ezra's reading of the book of the law of Moses & Ezra, and some of the priests explaining it's meaning to the people: the revival of the holy city of Jerusalem was going to spring from 'the reading of

God's word'. What do we say every Sunday: 'please stand for the entrance of the Bible'. It is such an honour and privilege to read God's word in His sanctuary. This point was made last year at our own General Assembly: read scripture regularly: pray regularly: scriptures work best when they're open & read; prayer works best when we do it & are open to God's leading.

Nehemiah was told of the great problems going on in Jerusalem: people in distress, broken walls, burned gates: & he could have said (since he was high up in the Persian government & a governor himself): 'sad, but not my problem': my life is fine: we've all met people who came out of less-than-ideal circumstances, with the help of others, but once delivered: once they're 'ok', forget the 'help from others' part & don't continue that trend or thought: 'as you have been helped-help others'; 'get even with those who have helped you': but we read earlier in his book: 'when I heard, I sat down and wept and mourned for many days': he wasn't too 'high and mighty' to get to work with and for God's people and holy city; in spite of obstacles: yes, there are always obstacles: & he wasn't too high, mighty, or important to be immune to God's leading in his life: leading him to an important mission. Remind you of anyone? The king & head of our church, perhaps? Irish praise team leader and songwriter Robin Mark has written many great songs of faith: one in particular says, of Jesus: 'he exchanged the joy of heaven, for the suffering of the cross & the presence of His father, for the suffering of the lost'.

One of many sermon titles considered for today was: 'Yes, it is my problem'.

Chapter 8: This day corresponded to the 'Feast of the Tabernacles': the reading of God's word was required for this occasion, but this had been neglected during the many years of Babylonian captivity: the people were getting back to their ways & roots; back to the Lord & His holy word. 'Ezra read God's word & he & others helped the people interpret it: this went from morning to mid-day' & the ears of the people were attentive. When Ezra opened the scroll, the people stood up: & Ezra blessed the Lord, the Great God. Verse 10: Nehemiah said to them: 'go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy to our Lord: do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'. Their focus was on God & God's word: we know that joy only comes from God: & this holy day & joy happened because God prepared a way,

yet again for His people, & set a specific mission before Nehemiah: the real accomplishment that happened here was not that the Jerusalem wall was being rebuilt or that the people were back in their city: it was that they were reading God's word again, praising God again, and living with the joy that only comes from God. It's easy to see only the earthly task in front of us & not see the big, divine picture, and plan & what God might have in mind for our role in it.

Someone once asked a McDonald's executive what their business was: the response: real estate: so many of their restaurants sit on very valuable, prime land: downtown or on busy corners or highways.

So God, our shepherd had seen straying again & prepared the way back to Him again & the people that would figure into this plan: that's what our faithful God does, over & over again: God doesn't give up on us, His creation: think of what happens when we do something different than what our GPS tells us to: it recalculates & shows us the new route: it's up to us to follow it or not. Every one of us is part of 'a way': every one of us is being trained in our own journey of faith & its role: our role in someone else's journey of faith or a task that God lays on us; we don't practice our faith in isolation: Jesus didn't sit in a cave & meditate with candles, chants, & incense for 3 years: that wasn't what God had in mind for Him or for us.

This work is still a work in progress: change is slow; the urgency to change or see things differently is lacking.

Paul established a church in Corinth. He lived there & preached there: but miraculous & quick 100% change, wasn't to be. Corinth was a major trade center, with people & goods from all over. Corinth was a very earthly and morally corrupt place: to 'corinthianize' came to mean gross immorality & drunken debauchery. The most prominent building on their acropolis was a temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love: in this 'temple' lived 1000 'priestesses': religious prostitutes who made the trip down into the city regularly. Corinth was unable or unwilling to break fully from the culture from which it came & the church was factional, with believers pledging their loyalty to whatever gifted speaker of the week, had come to them. The church of Paul, the church of Peter, & yes, even the church of Christ. All this, 55 years or so, after Jesus: a long time to teach & preach; a long time to wander from the message of Christ: Paul even says, 'was I crucified

for you'. Set your sights, your eyes upon Jesus. Staying in your earthly world of self-centeredness & selfishness is not where the joy of the Lord is found; neither will it be found in drunken debauchery.

In spite of a mountain of a task before Paul, he writes anyway: he has not given up on the Corinthians: he knows he has to change behavior & self-image before he can work on doctrine.

'Now I plead with you, bretheren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you be one in thought, judgement, and speech. That there be no divisions among you'. He knows that the kingdom of God: the new covenant in Jesus Christ cannot flourish when there are divisions & quarelling: lift up your eyes to God: make the Lord God: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit the focus & the yardstick by which differences are dealt with and interpreted.

There is great value in scripture, prayer, and asking: 'what would Jesus say?' 'what would Jesus likely do?' 'How would my performance review' with Jesus go?

It has been said, 'when you change the way you look at people and things, the people and things you look at change'.

Paul ends our reading today with 'lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power'.

Each time the Israelites strayed from God & His word, a way was put in place for their redemption: a way for them to return closer to God: & it usually involved God speaking directly or through scripture: God & His word & His plan of love and joy for His people: over & over again, faithfully.

People of the new covenant in Christ, at Corinth, had strayed from the cross of Christ: God prepared a way back, through Paul's mission trips & letters.

Our God will always prepare a way back; a way for not straying in the first place; a way for each of us to see our own role in 'the way back--the way forward' for us, others, & the God's eternal kingdom. The focus--the answer has been & always will be the cross of Christ, supported by prayer & the regular reading of scripture.

Amen.

