

Title: Time to Build: Vision
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Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
Text: Nehemiah 1

In the 6th century before Christ Babylon was the superpower that effectively ruled all of the Middle East. By comparison, Israel was barely a nation at all – living under Babylonian rule. Of the 12 tribes of Israel – only 2 remained in the Promised Land – the others being carried off into captivity by the Assyrians centuries before.

In 597BC a new king assumed the throne in Jerusalem. His name was Zedekiah and he was 21 years old. Zedekiah and the people he ruled were sick of Babylon bullying them and so, against God’s direction, Zedekiah developed an alliance with Babylon’s enemy, Egypt. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was not happy. And so he had his forces invade Judah, destroy its army and lay siege to Jerusalem. The siege began in 588BC and lasted 30 months. Untold horror was experienced by Jerusalem’s inhabitants – famine, starvation, epidemics – people died in their thousands.

Finally, in the year 586BC, the Babylonian forces conquered Jerusalem. Thousands were killed, and those not killed were forced to march 1000 miles east to exile in Babylon. King Zedekiah was forced to watch as each of his sons were killed, after which his eyes were gouged out. The last thing he saw was the death of his sons before being placed in chains and forced to march with the rest of his former subjects.

The shame is not over. The temple that Solomon built is destroyed – one of the wonders of the ancient world – is destroyed; burned to the ground. The city fortifications – its walls – are destroyed. As the exiles look back, their city – the City of David – is in ruins – a smoldering mess. Those that survive are now living 1000 miles from home – slave labor in a foreign country. They wonder aloud whether the God of David has forgotten them:

Israel’s glory days - the glory days of David and Solomon are a sad and distant memory. But the story is not over – not yet.

Empires rise and empires fall. If history teaches us anything it teaches us this – empires rise and empires fall. Just look at Europe and China today. When Jerusalem fell, Babylon was a superpower. But 50 years later in the year 538BC, Babylon itself was conquered by a new empire – the Persians, led by King Cyrus. King Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles who had languished in Babylonian captivity to return home should they choose. Some did. Many didn’t. They had made a new home in a new land. In fact most had been born there – they had no memory of Jerusalem or its glory days.

Those that did return 1000 miles home did their best, but they returned to a city in ruins. They laid the foundation for a new temple. Almost one hundred years after King Cyrus conquers Babylon, many Jews still remain there including a man called Nehemiah. Nehemiah lived in the city of Susa, where he had been elevated to the important position of cupbearer to the King of Persia – King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was a trusted adviser and confidante to the King.

It is the year 445BC – almost 150 years after Jerusalem has been destroyed. Nehemiah hears that there are some fellow Jews in Susa who have just returned from Jerusalem. Nehemiah is curious. He asks the men to tell him of the state of Jerusalem. This is Nehemiah in his own words:

They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”
(Nehemiah 1:3)

Something breaks in Nehemiah. Something shifts. His reaction to this news is immediate and profound:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.
(Nehemiah 1:4)

Out of this crisis a God-directed and inspired adventure emerges. Nehemiah gains the permission of the King of Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Miraculously, the walls that had laid in ruin for almost 150 years – a symbol of Israel's shame and disgrace – are rebuilt in 52 days. 52 days! Nehemiah's accomplishments are breathtaking:

- He rebuilds the walls in 52 days.
- He does this using a rag-tag, dispirited, unorganised and infighting remnant living in Jerusalem.
- He confronts and eradicates the exploitation of the poor by the rich.
- With the prophet Ezra, he re-establishes the centrality of the Scriptures in Israel's life.

He does all of this and more while dealing with incredible opposition from his fellow countrymen as well as Israel's enemies.

Nehemiah's adventure began with a cry – a cry of lament. It ends with a cry – but this time a cry of joy. After successfully rebuilding the walls in 52 days Israel held a worship celebration with trumpets and choirs and singing. Two mass choirs marched around the top of the wall singing praise to God. God had smiled on Jerusalem again. This is the picture Nehemiah creates:

On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy...the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.
(Nehemiah 12:43)

Nehemiah's story begins with a cry of lament and ends with a cry of joy. Between these two cries God moves Nehemiah and the people of Israel.

There is a profound spiritual truth that is illustrated in the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

Before God can do something through us, he must first do something in us.

There are four movements – shifts that occur that I want to articulate this morning. My prayer is that just as God moved Nehemiah and the people he lead, God would move in and through us so that like Nehemiah and the people our praise might resound so loudly in our city that every person will hear us lift up the name of Jesus. Amen?

Here are at least four ways God moved then, and I believe want to move now in us.

God moved Israel from apathy to engagement, grasping to giving, certainty to uncertainty and fear to faith.

From apathy/ignorance to engagement

Nehemiah is living in Susa, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. He gets a report on just how bad things are. After one hundred years since the first exiles returned, the city walls are still in ruins and the gates still a charcoal pile. A city with no walls is a city with no defenses. And a city with no defenses is a city that is to be pitied and ridiculed.

Something shifts in Nehemiah. Sat down and wept, and then he fasted and prayed – not for a minute, or an hour or a day – but for weeks. The shame of Jerusalem had wrecked him to the point where he had to do something about it. Doing nothing was not an option. He was no longer ignorant, and he could not be apathetic. Even though he had never lived in Jerusalem, even though he knew none of its citizens – the restoration of Jerusalem became his cause. He was engaged in a mission from God and for God.

Jerusalem was the capital of Israel; the nation called to be God's light to the nations. And it lay in ruins.

Jesus called his church a city on a hill whose light cannot be hidden. The church of Jesus Christ is called to be a light to nations – shining the love, grace and mercy of God. While the church is doing wonderfully well in so many parts of God's world – here in Australia things aren't as they should be.

Last year the Christian Research association published a paper that tracked the decline in church attendance over the ten years between 2001 and 2011. Over this ten-year period, attendance in Uniting Church congregations declined 30%. 30%!

That is not decline; that's freefall. The Uniting Church, which I love, and have given my adult life to, is seen by Australian as old, irrelevant and dying. Melissa and I are serving on an interview panel for our region of the Uniting Church – our presbytery – which covers Brisbane south of the river, out to Beaudesert and down to the border – 45 congregations in all. One member of our interview panel shared that of the 45 congregations in our Presbytery, only 10 would have 10 or more kids in worship on Sunday. 10!

A couple of months ago the 2011 census data was released. It revealed the following for our postcode, 4226 Robina:

2011

Christians 64.6%

No Religion 21.1%

This compares with the 2006 data:

2006

Christians 67.6%

No Religion 18.0%

In our suburb, on our doorstep – less and less people are claiming Christian faith, less and less people are attending church, less and less people are hearing the gospel.

I have a question for you. What do you love most about living on the Gold Coast? Share quickly with the person sitting alongside you.

There is so much to love about living in our city; the beaches, the weather, the lifestyle. But all that glitters is not gold. People are doing it tough on the Gold Coast.

- The Gold Coast has a higher unemployment rate than for both Queensland and Australia.
- Median income is lower than for both the rest of Queensland and Australia.
- Median house prices are higher than anywhere else in Queensland other than Brisbane. There is mortgage stress, rental stress, and financial stress.
- Tragically, the Gold Coast has the highest number of child notifications of anywhere in the stat. Our most vulnerable are suffering the most.
- Our murder rate is double the rest of the state and we have substantially higher stealing, property and drug offence rates than for rest of Qld.

Folks, we don't have to go to Cambodia or Thailand or Bosnia to find people in desperate need for Good News. There is a world of spiritually hungry and dying on our doorstep!

Our city is materially rich and spiritually poor. Our city is desperate need of spiritually vital, bible believing, gospel proclaiming and compassion reaching churches that seek shine the light of God's love into every dark corner.

In the gospels Jesus is often described as being 'moved with compassion' when he saw the spiritual poverty of the people. The word translated from Greek as compassion is *splanchnidzomae*. Literally, it means to be moved in the inward parts. In Jesus' day it was believed that the seat of human emotions was not the heart – but the heart, lungs, liver, intestines – all the internal organs. Whenever Jesus saw spiritually impoverished people he was sick in the guts.

When Jesus was moved with compassion it always led to action. Nehemiah was moved with compassion at Jerusalem's plight. He had to do something about it – in a sense he had no choice. He was no longer ignorant, he could not be apathetic – he was now engaged in finding a solution.

Here is my prayer – that over the coming month God will break our hearts, captivate our minds, make us sick in the guts, keep us awake at night and leave us restless until we get off our butts and give our lives in service of the people who God loves.

We're told to go and make disciples, but we often just sit and make excuses.

(Francis Chan)

God wants to move us from apathy to engagement.

From grasping to giving

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he found a community marked by greed – especially among the rich, who exploited the poor. They were graspers – desperately clinging to the things they owned. He confronted them and personally modeled a different way using financial resources – giving up all his salary to feed the poor. He was a giver.

When it comes to money, there are two possibilities – people are either graspers or givers.

Last weekend Sue and I spent a couple of hours wandering around the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane. What a wonderful and whacky place that is. I have to admit there was a lot of art I just didn't get. There was one piece however that captivated me. It was a series of three self-portraits by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei.

In the first panel, the artist is holding a 2000 year old priceless Han Dynasty urn that he owns. In the second panel the urn has slipped from his grasp and is falling to the ground. In the third panel the urn is in pieces at the artist's feet. Knowing how valuable the urn is – it is shocking to think that Ai Weiwei deliberately dropped it to make his art.

Here is what I got from the piece. All the material things we desperately cling to in this life, all the things we hoard, all the things place value in will one day slip from our grasp. We are born with nothing and we will die with exactly the same. And yet so many of us invest time and energy in getting and grasping stuff.

CS Lewis said this:

Don't let your happiness depend on something you may lose
(CS Lewis)

So many of us seek happiness in getting and grasping when true, eternal happiness is found only in giving.

My prayer is that over the coming month God will convert more of us from graspers to givers.

From certainty to uncertainty

Nehemiah was living high on the hog. As cupbearer to the king he had power, wealth and status. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose. In leaving Susa for Jerusalem he was leaving certainty for uncertainty. There was no guarantee that his mission would be successful; in fact with human eyes the task looked all but impossible. He could lose everything – his reputation, wealth and even his life. Nehemiah had to fight the urge to settle for the comfortable status quo. No one would know – only God. Craig Groeschel has said this:

To step toward your destiny, you must step away from your security.
(Craig Groeschel)

We can step away from our security, or we can settle for it.

Abram was a wealthy livestock owner when God comes to him and tells him to leave the security of his home country to travel to a new land – Canaan - a promised land – where God would make Abram and his descendents into a great nation – a nation blessed to be a blessing. This was a staggering promise – Abram was 75 years old and his wife Sarai a similar age and they had no children.

Abram received this promise while he is in the city of Harran. He has already left his home city of Ur – the largest city in the world of that day. He has travelled with his whole extended family, including his father Terah. The whole clan has travelled from Ur to Harran and now is being directed by God on towards Canaan. But not everyone goes.

Harran is smaller version of Ur – a wealthy city full of idols. Its a comfortable place to live. A place that offers a much more certain future than an unknown land promised by God. And so Terah, Abram’s father doesn’t travel with the rest of the party. He stays in Harran. He settles for security, rather than stepping away from it. This is what we read:

Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.
(Genesis 11:31-32)

Terah lives to a ripe old age by anyone’s standards. In fact, as best we can work it out, he dies around the same time as his son Abraham. Terah dies in the safety and security of Haran. In doing so he has missed out on a remarkable adventure.

In waving goodbye to his son and daughter-in-law – Abram and Sarai – Terah waves goodbye to the amazing opportunity to see the fulfillment of God’s promises – stepping into Canaan of holding his grandson Isaac – the child of promise. Terah misses out on all of this and more because he settles for security rather than stepping away from it. John Ortberg says this:

Some of the saddest stories are the calls that never get answered, the risks that never get taken, the obedience that never gets offered, the joyful generosity that never gets given, the lives that never get led - the adventures that never happen.
(John Ortberg)

Since I’ve been your pastor there have been plenty of times when I have been tempted to settle in Haran rather than press on for the Promised Land.

For example, we could have settled for nice, safe comfortable evening service which would always get our leftover time, energy and money - a nice service that was never going to grow. Instead, four years ago we decided to launch a new young adult service. It’s been a hard, tough road filled with joy as well as tears. We started with so little – four years ago our young adult ministry met in our lounge room. But after stepping away from security, now we have a thriving young adult community that blesses us and our city in so many ways. I am so glad we didn’t settle!

A few years ago God gave us a vision to plant churches – to be precise, five new churches by 2021. It was a great idea, except we had no experience, no money, no leader, no team and no place to meet. So many times it would have been easy for us to throw our hands in the air and say, ‘Too hard!’ And it has been hard and difficult and expensive. But God has been good! After attending the first anniversary of Newlife – Pac Pines I can say I am so glad we didn’t settle for safe and secure – but followed God’s call.

It would be so easy to settle – to not embark on a big, bold adventure called Time to Build. We could settle for the security of where we are. Where we are is good – very good. But where we are is not where God wants us to stop.

Nehemiah stepped away from the security of Susa for his destiny in Jerusalem; Abram stepped away from the security of Haran for his destiny in Canaan. God is calling us away from the security of here and now for our Time to Build destiny.

One last comment; when I say God is calling us from certainty into uncertainty, this is what I mean and don’t mean. Time to Build is not my vision or our vision, but God’s vision. It is a vision birthed in prayer. Because it is God’s vision, the outcome is certain – we will extend our facilities to the glory of God. The ‘what’ is certain; it is only the ‘how’ and ‘when’ that is uncertain. Abram had no idea how God would make him and Sarai parents in their old age – just that God would. We don’t know how we will overcome some of the challenges we face, just that in God’s strength we will.

God is moving us from certainty to uncertainty. Finally, God will move us from fear to faith.

From fear to faith

Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem had to overcome their fears as they built the walls of Jerusalem. They were always under the threat of attack. Surrounding tribes ridiculed them. At one point, laborers worked with one hand and held a weapon in the other. Failure was always just around the corner.

The common belief is that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear.

Fear paralyses. Faith frees.

Fear steals our joy. Faith feeds our joy.

Fear diminishes us. Faith grows us.

Fear drives us from God. Faith drives us to God.

Fear kills our dreams. Faith fulfils our dreams.

Fear confuses. Faith clarifies.

There is a great story in 2 Chronicles when the people of God had to stare down their fear. Jehoshaphat was their king. What a great name! Anyway, Judah was surrounded by vastly larger armies from Moab and Ammon who were threatening attack. War was imminent and defeat seemed inevitable. Jehoshaphat called all the people together to fast and pray and seek after God. With all the people gathered in Jerusalem – men, women and children - the king leads them in an honest, desperate straight to the heart of things prayer -the best kind of prayer. The last two sentences of that prayer are these:

We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.

(2 Chronicles 20:12)

God answers their desperate prayer with these words:

Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.

(2 Chronicles 20:15)

In the end God confuses the armies of Ammon and Moab so much that they destroy each other so all that is left for Judah is to carry off the plunder.

Let's go to Jehoshaphat's prayer: 'We don't know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.'

Here is the thing: We don't always know what to do. But we always know where to look.

We don't always know how we are going to overcome the obstacles we face when pursuing God's vision. Where will the money come from? Which builder should we choose? How will we get final permission from council and the synod? Honestly there are so many ifs and buts we could be paralyzed into inaction. It's too hard, too difficult, too dangerous, too uncertain.

There will be sometimes where we don't know what to do. But we always know where to look.

Time and time again the bible tells us to 'Fear not' – in fact it is the most common command in the bible – repeated 365 times – one for every day of the year.

Fear not, for I am with you. I will strengthen and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

We may not always know what to do. But we know always where to look. And when we look on Jesus, when we seek after him with prayer and fasting – then the answers to our questions will come, one by one. George Muller says this:

Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. Faith begins where man's power ends.

(George Muller)

Before God can do an amazing work through us he first must to a wonderful work in us.

I believe that in this next season God is move powerfully in us as a community;

God is going to move us from apathy to engagement, grasping to giving, certainty to uncertainty and from fear to faith.

Let it be so God. Let it be so!