

Building for the Future: Assessing
Rev. Amanda J Dean
April 18, 2021

Last week we began a sermon series on Building for the Future: a Study of Nehemiah. If you joined us last week, you'll remember that Pastor Dwight set the stage for our journey through this book of the Old Testament. He shared about Nehemiah's history and how he came to be present in Jerusalem during a time of grief and loss.

A city with once beautiful, towering walls to surround and protect it, lay in ruins after it was conquered by Babylon. Gates were burned and the walls were compromised, leaving the people of Jerusalem vulnerable and weak.

Our scripture lesson this morning puts us at the beginning of Nehemiah's time in Jerusalem. Up until this point, Nehemiah has heard the plight of his people, he has mourned and wept for the city of his ancestors, and he has begun to fast and pray about how to respond.

Nehemiah is so overwhelmed with grief that his very demeanor changes and it begins to affect his work. As a cupbearer to the King, Nehemiah's job was to fly under the radar. But the weightiness of his grief is written all over his face as he brings King Artaxerxes his wine. The King notices this and asks Nehemiah about it.

The Lord emboldens Nehemiah to speak honestly about the plight of Jerusalem, the city of his ancestors. The King grants Nehemiah's request to travel to Jerusalem to assess the damage and create a plan to build for the future.

Nehemiah 2:11-16

So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

Pray.

United Methodist Relief Center, Mt. Pleasant, SC

- Went there every May with my College Ministry group
- Just past the beach houses and plantations, in the rural outskirts of Charleston and Isle of Palms, you find extreme poverty.
- People living in homes that have been passed down from generation to generation, worn from the hot SC weather and hurricanes that have come through.
- We always had roofing jobs to do, and the repairs that resulted from water damage. One year we'd strip, repair, and lay new shingles on a roof and the next group would rip out moldy carpet and drywall.
- After 3 years, I had a good relationship with the people on staff and had done a little bit of everything.
- In my fourth year, as we pulled up to an extremely damaged brick ranch, I started asking questions about the different things I saw.
 - Were we going to repair the soffits, as well as the drip edge?
 - Did they anticipate any structural damage in the roof?
 - Would we be using three-tab shingles or rolled roofing to repair the roof?

Assessing the damage:

Sensing my interest in the overall plan for repair, the site manager asked me to assist him in assessing the damage.

- As the team began to strip the roof of damaged shingles, we walked around the perimeter of the house to get a closer look at what needed to be done and what supplies we'd need.
- We measured the roof line to calculate how many bales of shingles' we'd need to complete the project.
- I was the scribe, writing down:
 - Drip edge, plywood sheets, roofing nails, tar paper, button cap nails, 2x4s.
 - We measure the windows for new trim.
 - We added caulk to the list to dry in the windows.
 - We'd need chalk line to make sure the rows of shingles were straight.

While the group dealt with tearing out the old, damaged roofing, we had to prepare for the new, so that the re-building could happen.

Assessing the damage after the Easter Tornado:

- After last year's Easter Tornado, many of us know what it's like to assess the damage.
- My husband, Justin, has been heading up the FEMA recovery for the City of Chattanooga for past year and it was incredible to see the amount of work that went into assessing what our community needed to rebuild.
- While many of our OUMC folks were cleaning up fallen trees and clearing driveways, Justin and his team were making a long term plan for debris removal, temporary housing, relief packages, and road repairs.
- It took months to clear and prepare for rebuilding.

- And the assessments that were made those first few weeks by the city, are still bearing fruit today, as communities, roads, schools, and churches are being rebuilt.

Nehemiah's Assessment of the Walls

In our scripture lesson for today, we hear of Nehemiah's initial assessment of the needs of Jerusalem.

There are several things that are interesting to note about Nehemiah's experience of assessing the damage.

1. He took a minute.
 - a. Well, more precisely, he took 3 days after arriving on-site before he made his way around the perimeter.
 - b. I'm sure that he caught a glimpse of the disrepair as he made his way into Jerusalem in the daylight.
 - c. Our text doesn't say what Nehemiah was doing during that time of waiting but it's safe to assume that he was resting and receiving hospitality from the community after his long journey.
 - d. I imagine that he spent his time meeting his long-lost relatives and hearing stories about his ancestors.
 - e. Perhaps he heard about the "good ole days" before the city walls were destroyed.
 - f. He immersed himself in the day-to-day lives of the people and began building relationships.
 - g. Before he could assess the damage of the wall, he had to assess the damage to the spirits of the people.
 - h. "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Teddy Roosevelt
 - i. He cared for the needs of the community before he began his work on the wall.
 - j. When it finally came time to look at the physical needs of Jerusalem, it's important to note that:

2. He was discreet when he examined the damage.
 - a. After three days of being immersed in the community, Nehemiah set out on his own, with just a few men, to take a closer look at what the needs were.
 - b. Although I'm sure it would have been much, much easier to see the full extent of the damage during the daylight, Nehemiah decided to use the cover of darkness to discreetly move around the perimeter, taking note of the needs before him.
 - c. I imagine that his companions were tasked with recording the needs.
 - d. "The city is vulnerable by the Valley Gate."
 - e. "The Dung Gate has been burned."
 - f. There's a major breach in the wall by the Pool of Shelah."
 - g. His discretion spoke to his respect of the people who were living within the walls. He didn't want the people to see his assessment as a judgment upon them and their inability to maintain and repair what had been damaged.
 - h. He knew that he needed to have all the information before he could help the people:
3. Take a long, hard look at the reality they were faced with.
 - a. The information he would share with the people of Jerusalem was a hard pill to swallow.
 - b. Their walls were destroyed and gates burned. Their safety was compromised
 - c. Their future survival depended upon their response to the assessment.

Rebuilding for the Future of OUMC

Brothers and sisters, we've spent the last year in a state of disrepair as a society. Just like the city of Jerusalem, we've found our lives under attack from the pandemic, job loss, racial tensions, and political turmoil. We've recovered from the devastation of a tornado, and yet there is still a lot of rebuilding left to do.

Last week, Pastor Dwight talked about the grief associated with the losses we've experienced. He said that we don't fear change as much as we fear the grief associated with facing the reality that things will never be the same again.

Like Nehemiah's time spent in the community, many of us have spent the last several months naming and noticing the emotional and relational challenges we face. We've missed the community that we had before the pandemic took social gatherings from us.

SLIDE: We've got to assess the damage...

1. Take a long, hard look at the reality we're faced with.
 - a. **In person worship attendance is** down by half from what it was pre-pandemic. Many people are still exercising caution because of Covid-19. Some people have gotten used to worshipping at home in their pajamas, and others have gotten out of the practice of worshipping at all.
 - b. As you know, we are re-launching adult groups over the next several weeks. As I've gathered information from group leaders, I've discovered that **5 Adult Sunday Morning Groups have not met, virtually or in-person, in over 9 months.**
 - c. **At least one group has decided to merge with another group because their class has disbanded.**
 - d. I have had to start from scratch with rebuilding the teacher base for the Wesley Special Friends Class. I've asked 6 people and only one person has answered the call to teach.
 - e. **The ministries that have taken the greatest hit are ministries with children and youth.**
 - i. Branden and Chrissy have worked tirelessly over the past year to keep families connected. They have done take-home packets to encourage at-home discipleship. They've planned safe and socially distanced events.

- ii. They even began to create and film Weekly Matters videos, spending more than 10 hours a week writing, filming, and editing video to help kids and students connect.
- iii. They re-launched Sunday morning groups with a Lenten Sunday School hour. We have had 2 children and only a handful present for Sunday School since we relaunched in mid-February.
- iv. Wednesday night Youth activities have gone from having 25-30 youth pre-pandemic, to having 10-12 students involved.
- v. The greatest challenge has been having the adults to serve in these ministries.
- vi. Since he arrived on staff in August, Branden has cold-called 30 people to ask them to be involved in youth ministry and you know how many “yeses” he’s got? One.
- vii. Chrissy has been trying to get adults to invest in our children through being small group leaders and no one is stepping up.
- viii. They even launched the “Just Say Yes” campaign launched two weeks ago—

If we take a long, hard look at our ministries at OUMC, we see that we aren’t as healthy as we could be.

SLIDE: Many of us have become consumers of God’s word instead of doers of God’s word.

We want to show up on Sunday, get a little encouragement, and then get on with our week.

Brothers and sisters, the cold hard truth is that the staff cannot, nor should they, do ministry on their own. If OUMC is going to not only survive this pandemic, but thrive in the future, we have to step up and out of our comfort zones.

We cannot survive as a staff-driven church. We have to have laity to step up and serve God by serving others.

SLIDE: Christ's Holy Church was never meant to be staff-driven, it was meant to be disciple driven!

This reality check may be hard to hear. Knowing that we are struggling to get people connected to adult, children's and youth discipleship is defeating. Deep down, I think we all want to be a vibrant and faithful worshipping community!

Now that we've assessed some of the damage, I have good news. God isn't through with us yet! Just as Nehemiah assessed the damage of the walls of Jerusalem, we know our weakest areas of ministry right now. We know that growing deeper disciples and reaching out to families with children and youth is critical for the future of OUMC.

The good news is: The harvest is ripe!!

Stats from the Mission Insite report

- **SLIDE: Search Perimeter:** We have just over 70,000 people living within a 10 mile area around the church.
- **SLIDE: Household with children under 18,** compared to state. Over the next 5 years, it is estimated that we will have an increase of 1,077. This isn't new households, but this is an increase in numbers per household—which means families are having more children.
- **SLIDE: Age Trends**

I don't know what God is calling you to do in this moment. Maybe you've been wrestling with whether or not to fill out a Just say Yes card. Maybe you turned Branden down when he called you 6 months ago, and you need to call him back.

In last week's worship service, you saw a video from Just Say Yes to the Next Generation:

SLIDE: JUST SAY YES!

Is God calling you to say yes to the next generation? If God is laying it on your heart to serve in children and youth, take your phone out right now and text Chrissy & Branden. They will work with you to help you find the right place to serve. Or drop your card in the box on your way out.

If God isn't calling you to children and youth, God is calling you to something. Be praying about how God is calling you to step up and meet the emerging needs of our church. As our future begins to take shape, we need to embody a disciple-driven church more than ever before!

And remember:

**SLIDE: "God doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called."
Like Nehemiah, we are building for the future. Are you ready to get to work?**

Pray.