

JANUARY 17,2010

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE: an overview lesson for Ezra-Nehemiah about re-building the Temple = God's people & God's house.

BIBLICAL SETTING & MESSAGE:

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide the example of the way in which Israel retold the stories of their history to address new situations in their life together as the people of God.

The time period that Ezra-Nehemiah addresses is 90-100 years after the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C. In fact, three events devastated the people:

1. Destruction of the Temple

2. End of the Davidic monarchy

3. Exile of the most prominent and promising of the population.

All this necessitated a radical reassessment of Israel's identity and relationship to God.

How should they understand what happened to them?

Had God sent them into exile,

or had the Babylonian gods prevailed?

Were they still the chosen people of God,

or had God abandoned them?

What had gone wrong?

Was God still able and willing to deliver them?

Would God remember his promises to Abraham and

David?

The answers were mostly in the negative. God's judgment on an unrepentant Israel was fulfillment of the prophetic warnings; i.e. Isaiah. Toward the end of the Exile period -- however -- Israel began to see that the judgment of the exile -- though necessary and justified -- was NOT God's final word.

Hope was rekindled through the preaching of Isaiah (2nd) and the recasting of tradition by the priests.

Ezra-Nehemiah brings a word of ENCOURAGEMENT to a community involved in the process of reconstruction -

- a community that still needed to hear how it was connected and nurtured by its past.

It would not be the Israel of old -

- those days could never be recaptured.

However -- the "Re-born" Israel was validated by ancient institutions and traditions that transmitted the eternal promise -- which in turn brought the assurance of continuity and sense of identity as the people of God.

OUR CONNECTION:

We have not experienced the destruction of our church buildings.

Yet -- they are of an age and condition that requires a good deal of resources. And their current condition (infra-structure, plumbing, wiring, etc.) make it difficult - if not near impossible - to adequately "*serve the present age*"

-(as the hymn says.)

We are not cut off from our Wesleyan heritage, nor our United Methodist denomination.

Yet -- like many of our sister congregations, we have allowed the "people of the land" to influence how we make decisions and follow God's leading.

We are a people -

- not an institution, nor a business, nor a governmental agency.

We are an organism -- not an organization.

And finally -- we value each person as a child of God -

- yet, as the community of faith -

- we are called to a higher purpose than meeting personal preferences.

We are, perhaps, closer in our experience to those left behind in the Exile.

We have experienced the departure of those with much potential and promise. A good number of our young people leave for college, or begin their early careers elsewhere.

We have to admit that some with broad vision and energy have left us for what they perceived to be more openness to their ministry callings.

And yet -- we are grateful for those among us - especially young adults and youth - who continue to share their visions, their talents, energy, and sense of service among us.

THE MASTER PLAN: *LIVING IT*

The process of developing a Master Plan (*THE Master's Plan*) has been a period of prayerful discernment.

Everyone who prayed, everyone who provided feedback through the surveys and listening meetings, played crucial parts in the process.

Now, it is time to take the plan and LIVE IT!

It's not a radical plan. However -- it will still be a challenge for a number of us in positions of leadership -- and for more members of our congregation.

Not everyone is going to be happy.

Not everyone is going to "get it."

Some will try to lay guilt trips about people and programs either being neglected or left behind.

Some will react by threats of leaving: either physically, or financially.

During my meeting with our DS last month, I shared with Sam that this would probably be a challenging year -- since the Master Plan had now been approved and accepted, I would really be pushing folks along.

I asked for any advice. He responded by telling me to keep reminding you all that it is the plan YOU discerned and accepted as God's calling to you....and not Madison's plan.

I've laughed a little about that -- because I can definitely say it's not "Madison's plan" -- you should be thankful it's not a "Pastor Madison plan".

And, so should I.

It will be a challenge to live into the Master Plan. And there's going to be some opposition -- both from within each of us and from others.

So -- where is the Good News -- the word of encouragement?

BACK TO THE BIBLE: EZRA & NEHEMIAH

I've been in much prayer about all this. Much of it has been concerning how I -- as pastor -- with all my human frailties and inadequacies -- can provide the needed leadership. Like Moses -- I've confessed my fumbling ways to God. And God -- like he always does -- pointed me back to his Word.

There are three things that occurred which brought the people of Israel truly back to the Promised Land and their status of as the children of God:

- 1. Rebuilding the Altar/Temple**
- 2. Reading the Scriptures/Renewing the Covenant**
- 3. Rebuilding the city walls around Jerusalem.**

Each of these acts of physical rebuilding corresponds to a spiritual/personal rebuilding of God's Temple -- God's People.

Rebuilding the Altar / Temple:

At the beginning of both Ezra and Nehemiah -- we discover each man began with prayer.

What was his role in the return of the people to the Promised Land?

Was this indeed God's will?

And then, the first structure that is rebuilt is the place of worship. The returning King, Zerubbabel, and the priest, Jeshua, understood that it was from the worship of the God of Israel that the people would have their identity reestablished.

For pastor, church leader, and church member -- our first activity begins with rebuilding our worship life (personal and congregational). And at this point, I am not talking about style of worship. What I am speaking about is **the heart of worship**.

Who is the center of our lives?

Who is the one whose opinion and values mean the most?

Before whose altar do we truly lay prostrate in submission?

I have to confess that too often I have bowed down to the Church as my idol.

- the denominational demands
- the expectations and limitations of congregations.

Who is your idol? At what altar do you worship?

Reading the Scriptures / Renewing the Covenant:

Ezra is called "the second Moses" in these books of the Bible -- because he re-introduced the Law (*the scriptures*) to the people.

The scriptures were read publicly.

They were explained.

And most importantly, they were re-interpreted to the people for their own time and circumstances.

And as the people recalled their history with this God of Abraham, Moses and David -- they realized that God had always been the one to initiate reconciliation and a relationship of love. It was in response, then, that they worshipped, and gave thanks -- which then infused their lives with joy.

My first love has been teaching the Bible.

It is what I enjoyed the most as a youth minister, as a director of Christian Education, and as a pastor. It has fed my soul, and informed my decisions.

But I have to confess, I have not been as involved with this first love -- and what I've come to reconfirm is one of my strengths as a pastor.

It has been good to increase my knowledge and skill as an organizational leader and manager of staff. I've grown as I learned and trained others in providing pastoral care.

However -- as I recall God's mighty acts of salvation in my life -- they center around the study -- the praying -- the teaching -- and the interpreting of the Bible.

Your passion -- your skill set may be in engineering, or business, or logistics, in the creative and applied arts.

Yet -- as a Christian -- the Bible and it's message of God's mighty acts of salvation...

-- will inflame your passion

-- will strengthen your skills

-- and inspire your creativity so that your soul is fed

-- and your life makes an eternal difference in the world.

Rebuilding the City Walls of Jerusalem:

In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, city walls were crucial. They delineated the rule of law and justice, and the precarious, often violent, ways of the wilderness.

Now, it is true that we do much talking about either moving beyond the walls or tearing down the walls of the Church. And that is still what we should strive to do.

Because, the walls we are talking about, nowadays, are human-made walls:

Walls of prejudice.

Walls of preference.

Walls meant to demean.

Walls build to hoard.

The walls that we need to rebuild are the walls of the holy city. There is a sacredness to our life in Christ that needs to be guarded. These walls are built to preserve life and love -- as God intends.

The attitudes and values of the world threaten my cultivating the mind that was in Christ, and building my life upon the values of the Kingdom of God.

The same worldly attitudes and values often find open doors into the life of a congregation:

Political parties are allowed to evaluate the teaching and message of Jesus, instead of the other way around.

Principles of profit and loss determine the validity of a ministry or program over lives changed by the practical application of the Gospel.

The world's view that ours is a life of scarcity dictates how we determine we will financially support our life and ministry together -- instead of God's promise of the abundant (better) life through which the measure we receive is based on the measure with which we give.

I confess I have allowed all these marauders into the holy city of my own heart and soul.
I confess I have allowed congregations in which I've served to leave their gates open to such invaders.

How about you? Where are the holes in your wall?

MAKING OUR MASTER PLAN "THE MASTER'S" PLAN:

Living into our Master Plan is going to be challenging. It is going to require courage and determination. It is going to require skills and talents that many of you here -- those of others within our congregation -- to implement.

Yet -- here is the Good News -

- here is the word of ENCOURAGEMENT:

The rebuilding to be done in our lives -

- and the life of our congregation **is the work of the Lord.**

Nehemiah announced to the people (*even at the beginning stage of their massive endeavor*)

"this work has been accomplished with the help (i.e. by the power of) our God." [Neh 6:16]

It is this Word that empowers us to look forward and continue in the next phase of God's gracious plan to win back the world from the power of sin, death, and evil.

When it comes down to it -- that's why we're here.

That's why Divine Street church is on this corner.

It's why we have been called, saved, and empowered by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We have been given the sacred honor and privilege to join in what God is doing in our community and in our world.

The rebuilding of our church -

- with new facilities and with new programs -

- **begins with the rebuilding of our hearts and lives into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

If we will but open up our hearts to the Lord,

God will rebuild the altar of our hearts -

- God will renew our minds with his Word -

- and God will strengthen our resolve through the spiritual disciplines.

If we will open ourselves for God to work completely in us-

then God will complete a mighty work through us and our life together as Divine Street United Methodist Church.