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## ***“Marvel: Nehemiah”***

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*Nehemiah 2:11-18 (CEB)*

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Nehemiah is our fifth and final hero in the Marvel series. Unlike some of our other heroes, Nehemiah’s heroism is pretty clear. However, his story might be one that you are less familiar with. Our scripture for today is just one part of the story and if we only focused on those 8 verses, you would probably leave here with a lot of unanswered questions. You still might leave that way, who knows? Not to mention, we would leave on a cliffhanger, because the very end of the scripture lesson is the excitement around rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, but none of the action. So, we will back up to see why the wall needed rebuilding and then fast forward to see a bit of what happens after the wall is rebuilt.

The book of Nehemiah, thought to be Nehemiah’s memoir of sorts based on the writing style, was originally a combined work with the Book of Ezra. These two books detail life in the early postexilic period, roughly from 539 to 430BCE. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were well-known leaders of the Jewish community during that time period, with Ezra as a priest and Nehemiah as a governor. The book of Nehemiah is a narrative of the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland after exile. Nehemiah himself was Jewish but was an official in the service of King Artaxerxes, a Persian king.

The book of Nehemiah starts out with Nehemiah asking his brother and men from Judah who were in Babylon how things were going back in Jerusalem, particularly wanting to know about the remnant that never went into captivity, as well as those who had escaped exile and returned. They said, “Those in the province who survived the captivity are in great trouble and shame! The wall around Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire!” Needless to say, the situation is not good. Upon hearing this news, Nehemiah sat down and wept. He mourned for days, fasting and praying before God. In his prayer he affirms that God is great and awesome, one who keeps covenant and is faithful to the ones God loves. Nehemiah asks that God would hear his prayer. He confesses the sins of the people of Israel, confessing that they have not kept God’s commandments. But then he asks God to remember the promise God made: “If you return to me and keep my commandments by really doing them, then, even though your outcasts live under distant skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.” Nehemiah is reminding God of God’s promises, even though God does not really need reminding. Nehemiah pleads that God would hear him and grant him success and favor before King Artaxerxes.

A few months pass by and Nehemiah was now serving as the king’s cupbearer. The opportunity finally presented itself for Nehemiah to take action. When he is serving the king, the king noticed that Nehemiah was sad and reckoned that Nehemiah must have a broken heart. Nehemiah shares with the king the trouble of his people, to which the king asked what Nehemiah needed. Nehemiah boldly asked, “if it pleases the king, and if you servant has found favor with you, please send me to Judah, to the city of my family’s graves so that I may rebuild it.” The king granted him permission. Nehemiah also asked for letters that would allow him to travel to Judah and (here is the gutsy thing) a letter to the keeper of the king’s forest directing him to supply Nehemiah with timber for the beams of the temple fortress gates, the city wall, and the house he will live in. What a bold ask! And he is given those things! Nehemiah recounted “The king gave me what I asked, for the gracious power of my God was with me.” Now when governors of neighboring territories of Judah heard about this, they were not happy. Having Nehemiah appointed as governor to this region (which is more explicitly stated in Neh 5) was a threat to their political and economic status. They will cause problems for Nehemiah as the story unfolds.

Nehemiah, along with officers of the king’s army and cavalry, traveled to Jerusalem. After three days, Nehemiah began his reconnaissance mission at night. He inspected the walls that had been broken down, as well as the gates that were destroyed. He kept this mission quiet but after he completed his recon work, he came and told the Jews, the priests, the officials, the officers, and the rest who were to do the work “You see the trouble that we’re in: Jerusalem is in ruins, and its gates are destroyed by fire! Come, let’s rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we won’t continue to be

in disgrace.” Nehemiah has emerged as a hero who will restore order and hope to a community in complete disarray. The people are thrilled and eagerly say, “Let’s start rebuilding!”

That brings us to the end of our given scripture passage for today, but we will continue on to gain a fuller understanding. Those same neighboring leaders, Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and now Geshem the Arab, mock Nehemiah when they learn of the rebuilding project. They question what Nehemiah is doing and whether or not he is rebelling against the king. Nehemiah affirms “the God of heaven will give us success!” and that “as God’s servants, they will start rebuilding.” They are doing this not in their own power, but God’s.

In Nehemiah 3, we see the wall and gates being rebuilt. Nehemiah captures the poignant story of everyone coming together to rebuild. He details who is rebuilding which portion of the wall or gate, but specifically, he shares who they are working beside. This was a collaborative, community project. The community is working in solidarity and reaching across differences to achieve a common goal.

When Sanballat and his cronies see the success that the Israelites are having, they became angry. They mocked them and their work, eventually plotting to come and fight against Jerusalem. Through all of this, Nehemiah was confident in God. They prayed that God would protect them. In what becomes a really amusing mental image, half of the workers continue rebuilding the wall while the other half stand guard. We are told in Nehemiah 4:17-18 “The carriers did their work with a load in one hand and a weapon in the other. The builders built with swords fastened in their belts and the trumpeter stayed by my side.” They were confident that God would fight for them but also practical in arming themselves.

The story continues with much unrest, both internal and external. There is a scarcity of food, Persian economic repression, and exploitation occurring within Nehemiah’s community. Resources and wealth are scarce, largely due to the Persian repression. People from the same community were being ruthless with each other, exploiting one another and taking advantage of each other. Nehemiah institutes a series of reforms and redistributes the resources in the community so that things are more equitable, giving of his own resources, in fact. In the process, Sanballat and Geshem continue to cause Nehemiah trouble. They knew that God had helped them rebuild this wall and that made them nervous. What else were they capable of? All in all, it took 52 days to rebuild the wall. Everyone was registered and settled into their new towns and during the Festival of Booths, the people gathered together to hear God’s word and worship.

We have covered a lot of ground in the book of Nehemiah. There are still six chapters remaining in the book of Nehemiah that we will not cover today but I encourage you to read them at home to complete the whole story. I think there are three key learnings for us throughout these eight chapters that we surveyed. First, confidence in God’s promises and character empowers us to boldly follow God’s call in our lives. The story of Nehemiah is one of boldness and steadfast faith. Nehemiah took bold actions in going to King Artaxerxes and asking to return home to rebuild. He was particularly bold in asking for timber for the project itself! Even though he continually faced opposition, challenge, and threat of attack, he remained steadfast and focused on the task he believed God was calling him to. Nehemiah knew God’s faithfulness in the past and trusted in God’s faithfulness in the present. This was not about Nehemiah; it was about what God would do through him. When we focus on the one who calls us, rather than our own strength or limitations, we find ourselves accomplishing things we could never imagine. Sometimes we are our own obstacles or roadblocks. Was Nehemiah’s vision audacious? Yes, but he recognized that it was something he could not accomplish without God. When God calls us, we can trust in God’s provision, timing, power, and presence.

The second learning from Nehemiah is the power of community. As I read through the book of Nehemiah, I was particularly struck by chapter 3, where Nehemiah details the rebuilding of the wall. He relates who was rebuilding the wall, what section of the wall they were rebuilding, but most importantly, who there were rebuilding beside. We see disparate groups of people working side by side, rebuilding the wall. They were all Jewish, but that does not mean they were the same. They were from different tribes, they had different roles, different life experiences. And yet, they came together to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. They were united by a common goal. Look at all of us here. Presumably, we are all Christian, but that does not mean we are the same. We have unique heritage, ethnic and racial identity, socioeconomic status. We have different life and work experience and yet, we are all gathered here for a common goal. We all share in the work and ministry of Christ. We are a collective representation of Christ here in the Heights community and together we are working to share the good news of Jesus Christ. We endeavor to love God and love our neighbor with our whole being. We are the embodiment of God’s love, hope, peace, and reconciliation in the

world. Do we have our differences? Absolutely. But let's not allow our differences within this congregation to take precedence over our common goal and shared ministry.

The third and final learning can be found in Nehemiah 8: there is a time for sorrow and a time for joy, and both can coexist. In Nehemiah 8, we see that the work of rebuilding the wall has been completed and everyone is settled back in their towns. The people gather together at the Water Gate to hear the Instruction, the book of the Law, being read. The people bowed down and worshiped God. A significant aspect to this story is that many began to weep when they heard God's word. Some commentators believe this weeping was the result of the realization of how they had not been faithful to God, and they were repenting for their disobedience. That is surely accurate in many ways, and it is good to repent of our sin. What really touches my heart, however, is this understanding: the reading of the law serves as a powerful reminder of their identity as people of God, and they begin to grieve over all of the lost years in exile and dispersion after the Babylonian devastation. It was a strong affirmation to hear that despite the destruction of Jerusalem and the community's struggles under Babylonian and Persian repression, they still belong to the Lord. They are reminded that they are not a conquered people, but God's people.

Friends, I am here to remind you that even though we have been through an exceedingly challenging time during recent years, we still belong to God. You are not forsaken. You are not alone. You are deeply loved and cared for. God has been with us and will continue to be with us. There is much to mourn and weep over because much has been lost. And yet, there is joy to be found. We do not have to create it or find it ourselves because the joy is the Lord's. God gives us strength; God gives us joy. That does not mean we need to be bubbling over with joy all the time (and if that is you, that is fine, just please keep your distance until I've had coffee in the morning). Whenever Rev. Kendrick and I get together for coffee, one of the questions we always ask each other is "what is bringing you joy?" Admittedly, sometimes one of us will say, "not much right now." And that is okay. Not feeling joy does not make you any less faithful. I can attest that even when I go through seasons that feel hurtful instead of joyful, I am still confident of God's presence with me. What matters is that we hold on to the promise that there is joy from God, that God gives us strength in those joyless seasons, and that God is with us. Psalm 30:5 affirms "though sorrow may last for the night, joy comes with the morning." Just as the sun rises every morning, there is always joy on the horizon. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Hold on to that promise and the assurance that you belong to God.

The main focus of Nehemiah's story is rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. It feels to me like we are in a season of rebuilding. Does it feel that way to you, too? We have made it through the pandemic, but much was destroyed or at least broken down in the process. Things are not what they once were. Some things may return to the way they once were, but we also have to accept that other things will never be the same. We recognize the grief and the loss that we have now carry with us. Rebuilding does not neglect or gloss over the collective trauma and grief we have experienced in the last few years but signals that we believe God is not done with us here at Church of the Saviour, that there is more work to be done.

I believe God is calling us to rebuild our community here at Church of the Saviour. To reconnect with each other and grow deeper together through small groups. To engage in the life and ministry of the church, to serve within these walls and in the greater community around us. God is calling us forward into deeper discipleship, to put our faith into action, to show that love does, and to fearlessly contend for justice. God is calling us to rebuild. What is your section of the proverbial wall? Who will be beside you? Let's dream together of what things could be if we listened close for the voice of God leading us and boldly followed. We have the example of Nehemiah. It will not be easy, but with God's help, it will be worth it and more. It is time to rebuild. Thanks be to God. Amen.