

Building Projects: Let's Do It Together

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:17-18; 6:15-16; 8:1-12

We don't often read from the book of Nehemiah. To put it into context, let's review some of the history of the children of Israel.¹

The kingdom of Israel formed under King Saul and continued under David and Solomon before dividing into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Eventually both kingdoms were defeated, the temple was destroyed, and God's people, the Israelites also known as Jews were exiled to far off Babylon which later came under the control of Persia.

During the time in Babylon, they lost much of the tradition, laws, and worship that had formed them as a people during the time of Moses and then under King David and King Solomon. The story of the exile ends with an announcement from the Persian King Cyrus to the Lord's people exiled in Babylon that they are free to go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel. Those who stay behind should support those who want to go with silver and gold, supplies and cattle, and special gifts for the temple.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story of God's people and tell what happened after the exile." It's the story of the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland.

The writers of the stories in these two books conflated and rearranged events as they told the story, so it's hard to make an accurate timeline of events. The sequence of events during the next century is something like this: (1) King Cyrus commands the Jews to return to their land and resume temple worship. (2) They return to their land, resume worship and begin to rebuild their temple. (3) They quarrel with those living in the land, who don't want the temple rebuilt. (4) They rebuild the temple and resume temple worship. (5) King Artaxerxes commands all the Jews to obey the laws of Moses and authorizes the reestablishment of Jerusalem. (6) The Jews rediscover Mosaic law and impose it on themselves. (7) They quarrel amongst themselves about how much they need to separate themselves from non-Jews. (8) Ezra insists on obedience to the law's demands for separation from non-Jews. (9) Nehemiah creates a distinctive Jewish identity when he decides to restore the wall that encloses Jerusalem. (10) The Jews quarrel with those living in the land, who don't want the wall rebuilt. (11) They rebuild the wall despite the opposition. (12) Nehemiah purges all things foreign from the community.

The story includes starts and stops, enthusiasm and despair, cooperation and quarreling. Let's look more closely at the wall building part of this story found in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is working for the Persian king when some men travel from Jerusalem to visit him. When Nehemiah asks them about the city of Jerusalem and the Jews who are living there, he is distressed by their report that the returned exiles are hated, and the Jerusalem wall is a pile of rubble.

¹ Sources consulted include Rolf A. Jacobson, Karl N. Jacobson, Hans H. Wiersma, *Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms*, Augsburg Books, 2009, p. 89; Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Workplay Publishing, 2016, pp. 157-160 and The Bible Project, <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>

Nehemiah is overwhelmed with grief. He sits and weeps. He fasts and prays. He confesses his sins, his family's sins, and the children of Israel's sins. He reminds God of God's promise to Moses to gather the people from the ends of the earth to a place where they can worship God together.

Nehemiah asks God for the courage and opportunity to talk to the king. He attempts to hide his sadness from the king, but after four months of watching Nehemiah mope around, the king asks why he is disturbed. "Why shouldn't I be sad?" Nehemiah laments. "My homeland is destroyed, and my city is a heap of rubble."

When the king asks Nehemiah what he wants, he gathers his courage and asks to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. After some negotiating, the king sends Nehemiah on his way with letters of protection, an army escort, and orders for enough timber to build walls, gates, watchtowers, and a house to live in. Some of the people he encounters are not happy about his plan to help the Jews who are in Jerusalem, but because of his connection to the Persian king they leave him alone.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he waits until dark and then rides around the city. He discovers that the walls of the city are as bad as he has heard. No stones remain standing, and fire has consumed the wooden gates.

Nehemiah informs the rest of the Jewish people of his plan to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and demolish their disgrace because of defeat and exile. Everyone is immediately on board with the plan saying, "Get up now! It is time to rebuild." Nehemiah reminds them that they are likely to encounter trouble because they have no civic, legal, or religious claim on Jerusalem, but the True God of heaven will give them success. With that, the work begins.

Today we are celebrating the completion of another phase in our own building projects. Our history isn't as long as that found in Ezra and Nehemiah, but it's good to recount it to put this work into context.

Salina Mennonite Church began meeting regularly for evening worship in the spring of 1979 and moved to Sunday morning services a year later. Official membership began in April 1982 with the signing of the church charter. Over the years, the congregation has met in five different locations and had six different pastors as well as three interim pastors.

We purchased this building in June of 2004. Projects since then include removal of a baptistry and installation of the platform in the sanctuary, improvement of the ramp on the north side, creating Sunday school rooms in the basement and an office for the pastor upstairs, removing a closet, taking out the chain link fence surrounding the back yard, adding benches and improving landscaping on the south side, installing new carpet in the basement, widening doorways and improving the hallway between the fellowship room and the sanctuary, installing new steps and tile on the south entrance to the fellowship room, moving furniture and removing wall dividers to create an upstairs fellowship room, building an upstairs kitchenette, making window coverings and wall hangings, planting a butterfly garden and expanding it to be a peace garden with memorial plantings, installing a projector, improving the sound system in a variety of ways, and figuring out a way to have a Zoom connection during worship. Other maintenance projects include new air conditioners, furnaces, windows, roof, and siding. And now, of course, our sanctuary has new seating, carpet, paint, light fixtures, and wall decorations. We've also improved the platform and refinished the pulpit.

As with the writers of Ezra and Nehemiah, I've conflated and rearranged the events. Any errors or omissions are inadvertent. What else should I have listed?

The third chapter of Nehemiah lists the names of people who worked on the rebuilding project and the portion of the wall each one helped to build. Many different people from many walks of life and relationships with each other worked together to complete this huge task in fifty-two days.

Our project took much longer than that, unless we count only the days work was actually being done rather than the length of time from when we began the project until its completion. In the spring of last year, we received a large gift from Susan Reitz's children, Meredith and Grover. We decided to use that gift to purchase new seating for the sanctuary. We also decided to use some of the money in our Everence Mutual Fund to make additional improvements to the sanctuary and entry way. As I list names of people involved in the various projects, please let me know of any omissions. My memory is faulty, and I want to give credit where credit is due.

At the beginning of June of last year, Leadell, Annelle, Vera, and I consulted with Cavin Lambert of Sauder Worship Seating. We chose some samples and after input from congregation members placed an order. We hoped to have our new chairs by the end of the year and planned for the other work to begin in the fall. To our great surprise, our furniture order was delivered on September 21. Several men from The Salina Rescue Mission helped us to unload the truck. We stored the new seating in the fellowship room.

We began worshiping only on Zoom in October to allow work to be completed in our worship space. Leadell coordinated all the work that happened here over the next two months. Several people took custody of the old pews. Others moved the rest of the furniture and window coverings into the fellowship room and wrapped the piano in blankets and plastic to protect it from paint and dust. Tom, Pete, Henry, Lee, and Gary removed the old carpet. Gerald unhooked the sound system. Maas Painting completed the painting over the next few weeks. Ted, Tom, Annelle, Jacob, Gary, and Pete removed the staples that were left behind when the old carpet was removed. And then we waited.

Mike Ritter and Ritter Tile installed the carpet at the beginning of December. Chris Helm from Helm Electric installed the new light fixtures and fans. Randy Choitz of Choitz Electric replaced all the outlet and light switch covers. Many people from the congregation helped move the new seating and other furniture into the renovated space. Gerald put the sound system back together. We returned to in-person worship in our sanctuary on December 5.

The work has continued since then. Tom refinished the pulpit and baseboards. Leadell created the wall hangings. Ted and Vera purchased the peace banner for the entryway. Lee kept the building clean. Lori, Mark, Sherry, Annelle, Mike, Lois, and Lynn worked on the yard and landscaping. All of you contributed in various ways to bring us to this day of celebration. Thank you.

I can think of several connections between our work and the work described in Nehemiah, Chapters 4-6 of Nehemiah describe the obstacles and opposition the workers encounter during their project. Nehemiah struggles with outsiders who oppose the restoration of Jerusalem and the Jewish people. He also encounters struggles within the group working on the wall. The Jews argue among themselves about religious practices, food distribution, taxes, slavery, and exploitation.

We haven't had any opposition from outsiders, but we haven't always agreed on the timing, budget, or necessity of various building projects. Nine years ago, we explored the possibility of an extensive renovation project that included adding an elevator, changing the orientation of the sanctuary, and building a new entrance. Some of us were eager to go ahead with project; others were hesitant. Instead of that project, we made some of the other changes I

mentioned earlier. Over the years we have been hindered by inertia, not being clear about who has the authority to move ahead on a project and tending to want to have everyone weigh in on a decision. For some reason with this project, the pieces seemed to fall into place. Our main hindrances were issues with the supply chain and worker availability.

In Nehemiah 8, Ezra, who is a priest, summons the people to a ceremony for the reading of the law. Men, women, and older children are present at this assembly. A group of laymen lend their authority to the reading. Other priests, the Levites, circulate among the people, ensuring that they understand what is being read, perhaps even translating the words from Hebrew to Aramaic. The people nod their heads in agreement with what is being read. They weep in repentance because now they know they have been disobeying the law that had defined them as God's people. The priests tell the people to stop their weeping and to celebrate because it is a holy day.

The Jewish people prayed and listened to God's voice.

We too have tried to listen to God throughout this project.

The Jewish people worked as a group, helping each other out. I could have made it easier for Tom this morning and omitted the verses with all the names, but I wanted us to hear that Ezra and Nehemiah did not go it alone, they needed help.

We too have tried to value each other's opinions, listen to each other, and help each other out, each offering our gifts, talents, and insights

The Jewish people remembered what defined them as a people and they returned to it. A foundational story of their existence was the Exodus, their deliverance from slavery in Egypt led by Moses, and then the giving of the law to them. It was observing this law that had guided their lives and their worship. Some of the measures Ezra and Nehemiah took to return them to living by that law were drastic and harsh. It's hard to see them as a good thing.

We too have remembered what we have determined to be our goals, our guiding principles as a congregation. These include maintaining our identity as Anabaptist Mennonites, relating to our neighbors and community, and welcoming everyone who comes to us, both by our attitudes and by the physical characteristics of our building.

The Jewish people celebrated the completion of the building project and their return to following the ways of God.

Today we too rejoice and celebrate, thankful for this place of worship and the people with whom we worship. We mourn the ways we have failed to follow God's leading or have hurt each other. We renew our commitment to maintain our part of the body of Christ and welcome others to join us.

Praise the Lord! Let us praise God in this sanctuary. Let us praise God with our music and our words. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Amen.