

February 10, 2019

The National Presbyterian Church

**"Walls and Gates:
New Life Begins With Prayer"**

Nehemiah 1:2-11

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In our sermons this winter we're working our way through the storyline of the whole Bible, and we come this morning to the last of our sermons based in the Old Testament period, the approximately 1800 year period in the time before Jesus lived, when God's work of salvation was primarily focused on the literal descendants of a man called Abraham, people initially named the "Israelites" or "Hebrews" and then, about 4-500 years BC, called "the Jews" (the word "Jew" comes from being a member of the tribe of "Ju"-dah).

And this is the period I want us to focus on today: around the mid-400's BC, when God's ancient people are in a century-long process of returning to live in the Holy Land, and in particular to the city of Jerusalem, after living in a foreign land, living in exile, living in both Babylon (modern day Iraq) and then Persia (modern day Iran).

This long process of return to the homeland was not easy.

1. For example, not everyone liked the Jews. Antisemitism is, tragically, as old as the hills. And last week from Pastor Joyce we heard how the wholesale slaughter of the Jews (a potential holocaust) was averted in the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes by the courage of his Jewish Queen, Esther
2. And then too, two weeks ago, Quinn spoke about the initial return to the city which lay in ruins: Jerusalem and its temple needed to be rebuilt. Worship needed to be re-established. BUT there were significant obstacles in the way: opposition, scarce resources, disappointment with the construction itself.
3. And then, as well: in the years to come in this era, another problem would arise. People would run out of spiritual steam. People would lose their spiritual vitality for the long haul. The last book of the Old Testament part of the Bible, Malachi, speaks about this.

And then there's our story today: -- The story of Nehemiah who is the cup bearer (more like "the chief security officer") for the king of Persia. Nehemiah seeks permission from the king to return to Jerusalem **and rebuild its walls** (not only the Temple or the buildings, but the walls) – and the permission is granted.

ASIDE: Now – I've said this to you often before . . . I pick out the general passages and themes to preach on months ahead of the day I preach. And when I set the schedule for today I had no clue that the issue of building a wall (in this case, on the border with Mexico) would be on the front burner politically as much as it has been in recent weeks! So blame it on God: this is God's timing: not mine!

So -- what I want to say this morning is that – from a Biblical perspective walls are important – boundaries are important but so too are gates and without prayer for God’s wisdom we will inevitably get the balance wrong between walls and gates

- either becoming cold, harsh, exclusive, self-centered and fearful – living behind a wall
- or on the other hand, losing any sense of identity, or personal power and effectiveness, including perhaps losing our lives, because of our passion to be all things to all people, leaving us with no boundaries and no sense of distinctiveness or standards.

Many of you know that I recently spent two weeks in Pakistan and Jordan. In Pakistan along with ten other Presbyterians, I was visited Forman Christian College. Forman is a top notch university in Lahore, Pakistan, in the northeast. We support Forman with \$10,000 each year through our annual budget, and have also supported them through a significant bequest of \$100,000 from the late John and Dorothy Shaw.

- Forman as a university serves 4700 men and women (40%), both Christians and Muslims (85%+)
- The campus includes a large high school of a further 3000 11th and 12th G boys; and a growing K-9thG school called “Light of Hope”

In 2003, after three decades of being mismanaged by the state, the government – the Muslim government, led by then President Musharraf, himself a graduate – asked the Presbyterians to take it over again. And the transformation has been radical.

So I visited Pakistan, and then on the way home, my wife Currie joined me in another nation: Jordan. In Jordan, we visited the Marka church in the capital city of Amman. Marka is a district or suburb of Amman. The ministry of the Marka Church will be the recipient of just over \$160k- - over the next three years from our capital campaign.

The Marka Church has a broad ministry as a local church, but also as a church focusing on ministry to refugees: both to primarily Christian Refugees from Iraq, and to predominantly Muslim refugees from Syria. Most refugees in Jordan are not allowed to work for any income, except within the ministries of the church; and many have little hope of being accepted by any other nation than Jordan as refugees, or of returning home because of on-going threats to their lives.

- One of the most poignant stories we heard -- in person -- in Jordan was from a young Muslim woman whose husband had been in the Syrian air force, and had refused to bomb civilians and was summarily executed!
- But the biggest threat, especially in Iraq seemed to come from non-government roving militia, especially threats to Christians, women and girls: sex trafficking is REAL!!

So these refugees are stuck in Jordan, and in poverty, for the long haul – and the witness of the church is powerful and vital:

- Providing basic food
- Teaching work skills
- Providing medical and dental care
- and Educating children whose future is bleak
- As well as proclaiming Jesus Christ to both Christians and Muslims (we visited in the homes of Muslims who asked me to pray in Jesus’ name) and repeatedly we watched tears of pain, but also of joy and thanks!

Your gifts are vital, and are being well spent!

BUT ONE THING BECAME QUITE APPARENT to me in both places and nations: ***that without walls none of these great ministries would be possible.***

In Pakistan, the 109 acre Forman Campus, for example, is surrounded by a significant wall, with approximately 140 security guard employed and cameras everywhere.

“Why did you choose to come here?” I asked both Christian and Muslim students. To which many replied: “we are safe here” – physically safe; and more than that: safe to think and explore and learn intellectually. (some I met, come from close to the Afghan border, where there is no safety, either literally or intellectually).

And in Jordan: while there is no border wall between Jordan and Syria, still, the border is a defining “line in the sand,” and within the walls of the church building and its school the people feel secure.

In fact, when we visited a half dozen families in their homes (often large families of 8-11 people crammed into three small rooms), we heard the same refrain repeatedly:

“We are here – and will endure any poverty that we must to stay, because we and our children feel safe – and feel love.”

Nehemiah was called by God to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem, despite numerous opponents and obstacles along the way. And he built the wall because he realized that without a wall

- No community could be built
- lives were in danger
- the temple itself was in danger
- and the ability to grow in faith would be constantly threatened. In fact, it was within those walls that Ezra’s ministry of preaching and teaching (Neh.8) would flourish.

So Nehemiah re-built the walls. BUT – THAT WAS NOT HIS ONLY FOCUS . . . Walls are important . . . our houses have walls! Our church has walls (there is no glorious music without these walls creating acoustical space! Good acoustics depend on walls!). Walls are important, BUT SO TOO ARE GATES. And Nehemiah knew this too.

In fact, a careful reading of the whole book of Nehemiah reveals that within the wall that Nehemiah built, ***there were 12 gates.*** His book mentions

The Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate,
the Fish Gate, the Old Gate, the Horse Gate,
the East Gate, the Muster Gate, the Sheep Gate,
the Guard Gate, the Gate of Ephraim,
and (guess what?!) the WATER GATE

Gates on every side of the city!

Like the Statue of Liberty – like beacons crying out to those within the walls and beyond that Nehemiah’s passion for the city was NOT just for rebuilt walls, not just for safety, and security (a castle, for example, has only one gate, surrounded if possible by water; of course there might be a secret gate as well – but not 12!!) – but for the kind of safety and security that would facilitate as much coming and going as possible.

So, this Balance between *Walls and Gates and Gates and Walls* was built into the very fabric of Nehemiah's restored city, just as it has been built-into the experiences of -- the students at Forman Christian College in Pakistan, and the refugees in Jordan.

Forman opens its gates to an unheard of variety of groups in Pakistan, who rarely if ever get to live together: Muslims and Christians; men and women; rich and poor.

Some of the rich are very rich (see the list of graduates in the appendix). And some of the poor are VERY poor – including many Christians, who have often been side-lined in society.

And our gifts to Forman go especially to scholarships for these. To be sure: the walls bring a profound sense of security, but no climate of fear or exclusion, and in fact, the opposite: a broad sense of embrace and welcome, and a vital “time apart” to prepare for re-entry into the world outside.

And this was what we saw in Jordan too: **Jordan's borders may be secure** (and in that region they need to be!), but **its gate to people in need has been very wide.**

About 1.4m refugees have been welcomed, out of a total population of 10million. This is 14% of the total population (in the U.S.A. this would amount to 50 million people). 50% of these are children.

And THE GATE OF THE CHURCH SCHOOL in Amman is wide too.

Many of the refugee children have special needs: permanent damage (in one case, hearing loss) because of the lack of medical care for months on end. Or Down's syndrome. This is what we saw. And Just as Jesus takes us in (takes a risk on us), they take them in, when no one else will. Their door is open, when others are not

In John 10, Jesus speaks about himself as the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep into a sheepfold. A sheepfold is a circle of stone – a circular WALL, that may be 40 feet in diameter; an enclosure that sheep go into for safety.

Listen to what Jesus says: John 10:2-5, 9

²The one who enters the sheepfold by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

[And then he adds in v. 9]

⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

In other words: the sheepfold with its wall is the place of security, a safe place to listen and learn, to sleep and be refreshed.

And there's no doubt that we need that: Jesus wants that safety for us. Indeed, a sheepfold is more like a castle than the city of Jerusalem with its 12 gates: there is only one gate in a sheepfold. BUT Jesus is also clear HE IS NOT THE WALL – but the gate. In other words, defense is not his passion – but both safety and access to the world outside.

v.9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture . . . I call my own sheep by name – and lead them OUT.

So that the purpose of being one of Jesus' sheep is not just to live within the walls of the sheepfold alone, but to go in and then come out into the world: to be God's servants IN THE WORLD. Which is almost always a difficult and tricky, and risky place.

The question, of course is:

- "How in the world we can know when to build a wall – and when to build a gate?"
- How do we know "when to live inside the walls -- and when to step outside?"

And to that question, I'm not sure there's an easy Biblical answer . . . except that those are the questions we should be asking and praying about.

We are NOT just to be asking, "How can we build a better wall?"

OR even, "How can we build better gates?" (as if one option was evil and the other was not).

BUT we should be asking about both of them together:

"How do we balance walls and gates, so that we experience new life, and do not crush the human spirit – Whether In our church? Or in our families? Or with our children? (especially our youth); Or in our nation and the world?"

We should be asking, indeed, pleading with God for wisdom to get the balance right.

Nehemiah's wall and gate-building ministry began with prayer:

- weeping for his people from his heart
- remembering that the mess they were in was their own fault
- that their nation was weak not because of others, but because of their own sin against God,
- and claiming God's promised to restore his people . . . LISTEN:

NEHEMIAH 1:5

I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, . . . ⁹'if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.'

¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

Give success to your servant today

In his case the right course of action, one with the right balance – God's course of action, was for him to build a wall – a wall with plenty gates: 12 gates . . .

May God give us, in his church, in our families, and in our nation – great wisdom to get the balance right.

WALLS & GATES

In the Bible . . .

“Walls” (clear boundaries) are Necessary

- Nehemiah 1:2-11 – Nehemiah is called by God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Jerusalem is also known as “Zion”, not just a place, but the community of God)
- Revelation 21:12-14 – The New Jerusalem (Heaven) has walls

So too are “Gates” (access points)

- In both Nehemiah and Revelation, the walls of Jerusalem provide vital security, and self-definition for God’s people. But these walls *intentionally also have 12 gates* – a highly symbolic number representing plenty access for all.
- John 10:1-9 – speaks of Jesus not as “the Wall” but as “the Gate.”
- Romans 5:1-2, Hebrews 10:19-22, Ephesians 2:14 – Jesus’ death was understood by the first Christians as opening a door (a gate) and providing access to the very presence of God. The image used was that of the barriers (a curtain and walls) in the Jerusalem temple, which previously divided Jews from Gentiles, men from women, and all people from God), being torn apart and broken down by Jesus’ death.

PRAY FOR OUR PARTNERS IN MISSION
Your Generosity makes a SIGNIFICANT difference
in a troubled world

LAHORE, PAKISTAN: Forman Christian College University

Christians comprise 1.5% of the population of Pakistan, and have long felt the sting of prejudice in education, housing, employment and religious freedom.

FCC enrolls over 7000 students from 11th grade through graduate school, and sustains an environment where Christians (about 15% of enrollment) and Muslims, men and women, are allowed to live and study side-by-side, many for the first time. In doing so, in a polarized society with global impact, awareness and acceptance are expanded, literacy rates are increased, and individuals and families (especially poorer Christian families who have often faced discrimination) are elevated. A vital Christian Life Ministry nurtures Christian students.

Among the graduates of the college are two presidents, an attorney general and a chief justice of Pakistan, a prime minister of India, and a number of governors and chief ministers of the Punjab and other provinces – leaders forever influenced by their education in a Christian environment.

For more details: www.FriendsofForman.org;

www.theoutreachfoundation.org; www.fccollege.edu.pk

Support from NPC:

\$10,000 in our annual budget

\$100,000 from 2012-2015 through a bequest from John and Dorothy Shaw

AMMAN, JORDAN: Evangelical Marka Philadelphia Nazarene Church

(note: “Marka” is an area of Amman, akin to Anacostia in DC; “Philadelphia” is the ancient name for Amman)

“Our goal from the beginning is to establish a community that knows Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer; and, to instruct this community to serve the Lord, not only within His Church; but throughout the nation of Jordan.”

Most of the 1.4 million Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan do not live in camps but within the urban areas of Jordan, especially Amman. Less than 10% of Syrian refugees have been able to get work permits, and Iraqis are not permitted to work at all. Poverty is endemic.

Some have hope of being resettled elsewhere, especially Canada and Australia – but some, including some who have worked for the U.S. Military in Iraq, have little hope of returning home or of finding a permanent residence elsewhere than Jordan.

The Marka Church serves both Christian and Muslim refugees in Amman and in some of the smaller refugee camps. Men and women, widows and orphans, and children who have faced indescribable trauma are provided with food, education, job training, medical and dental help, and much more.

Ultimately, the church feeds both physical and spiritual hunger in every sector of the refugee population through a vibrant, open and immensely practical witness to the faith, hope and love found in Jesus Christ

For More Details: www.asenseofcommunity.org/refugeeservices;
www.impactmiddleeast.org/jordan; see Evangelical Marka Church on Facebook.
<http://www.dalehansonbourke.com/how-your-church-can-help-refugees/>

Support from NPC:

Over \$166,000 over the next 3-4 years from the Mission Component of our Capital Campaign.

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