

“The Good Hand of God Upon Us”

The other day I was talking with a member of the congregation about how important it is to actually read the Bible on a routine basis and you want to know what they said? “Pastor, I’ve tried to do that recently, but the Bible is boring.” When I heard this, the first thing I wanted to say was, “ Well obviously you’re reading it wrong, because the main message of the Bible is the good news of God’s work to reconcile the world to himself through Christ Jesus the Lord. How could that be boring?” That’s what I wanted to say. But instead, I simply asked what book of the Bible were they trying to read that gave them this idea? Well at that point, the somber look on their face quickly turned to a smile. And then that smile turned to full out laughter as they finally managed to blurt out the name, “Nehemiah!”

Now, obviously one of the men of Hope was having a little fun with the topic our current sermon series. And while I think Nehemiah is actually one of the most inspiring books in the OT, I can kind of get why someone would joke that it’s boring, I mean, we’re in the second week of the sermon series today, and so far it sounds like we’re reading from someone’s personal journal—and I’m not talking about the juicy stuff that might get our attention, but the normal day to day! “I was sad about Jerusalem.” “I prayed.” “I asked the King to let me go and help rebuild the wall, and he said yes.” Great, we might think....good for Nehemiah. But what does any of this have to do with us today?

Well, before we can answer that I think we need a little more context to establish what’s really going on here in our reading from chapter 2. We know from last week that Nehemiah was troubled by the news he had received about Jerusalem’s destroyed walls. In our reading today, he finally gets up the nerve to ask the King for permission to go to Jerusalem. But here is something that we miss by not reading the book of Ezra first. King Artaxerxes had already ordered

all rebuilding in Jerusalem to stop, including any rebuilding of the walls. So Nehemiah, the cupbearer, was not only asking for permission to leave, but was also asking the King to admit that he was wrong! I mean, can you imagine? But Nehemiah was grounded in his identity as a child of the covenant God made with his people, and he was determined to go back and help them.

The text from chapter 2 captures this tense moment that Nehemiah finally asks the King to let him go. And in what seems like a dramatic turn of events, King Artaxerxes hears this request and doesn't have his guards haul Nehemiah out out of the palace, or even worse, have his guards end Nehemiah's life, but he responds with the words, "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" And that was just the beginning. Because after the King granted him the request to leave and rebuild, he also granted Nehemiah letters for safe passage and a letter to the keeper of the King's forest that he could give Nehemiah all the timber he needed to complete the projects, including a house that he could live in while he was there! It's an amazing testament of a man who knew he couldn't have done any of this on his own, proven by his moving statement at the end of verse 8, "for the good hand of my God was upon me."

Is this boring you? I sure hope not, because the picture God paints for us through these first two chapters of Nehemiah's words is one of a virtually unknown man who risked it all for the sake of others in a place he had never seen—all out of the love he had for the God of his people.

But again, what does any of this have to do with us today? Is it as simple as these words are here for us to follow as an example? You know, Nehemiah was bold, so we too can be bold. Or Nehemiah stood up for what he believed, against all odds, so we can too. While I would never dismiss following such a wonderful example of someone putting their faith into action like Nehemiah, I think God wants us to see this text in the light of who he says that we are.

You see, through the gift of faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, God's good hand **is** upon us too. I spent a lot of time talking about this a few weeks ago in our

discussion on Baptism. And this is as good of a time as any to remind us once again that you have that gift. I have that gift. Little Luke (Sydney) has that gift. As Paul reminds us in our epistle reading from Titus, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people in Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession.” This is us, the baptized! And I love the way Paul ends this verse, because it ties directly to our reading in Nehemiah. We are a people of God’s own possession who are zealous for good works.

I think we Lutherans get the redemption part. But like most Christians, we sometimes struggle in applying this to everyday life. We are staking our lives on Jesus through the gift of faith given to us by the good hand of God are we not? But are we allowing Christ to shape who we are—how we live—what we expect in life? I mean, do we really think God’s good hand is upon us every single day, and through us can accomplish whatever he wants? Or are we functioning like he’s done everything to save us, but beyond that has virtually checked out of our lives?

This is where we can learn a thing or two from Nehemiah. Because faith means listening to what God can do. He could have heard Nehemiah’s prayer and done nothing. He could have taken any thought of rebuilding out of his mind. He could have hardened the King’s heart or allowed him to end Nehemiah’s life for having the audacity to ask him to do something he had already decided against. But God worked providentially through the King **and** Nehemiah to not only **prepare**, but **repair** this little piece of the world to ultimately receive the long-awaited King—the promised Messiah.

But do you think he is done? Yes, Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again for us all and is now seated at the right hand of God ruling the universe. But does he have it all on auto-pilot allowing sinner saints like us to do with it what we please? Or is he still at work accomplishing the extraordinary through ordinary people like you and me? Shame on us if we think the answer to this question is anything but yes!

But you know what? I have to be honest with you about something today. I really struggled with preparing this sermon this week. And maybe it was because I am just as guilty as anyone of not expecting much more from the good hand of God than the obvious. Of course I am a sinner. Of course I know I can do nothing to save myself. Of course, I have complete confidence that when I take my last breath or Jesus returns, I will be in his presence forever. But on a daily basis, I admit that I don't expect that much from him. I admit that if things are going to happen, all too often I think they happen because of my efforts. And I'm sure the same is true for you. But this is wrong.

But then I got a phone call from a member yesterday morning that was a powerful reminder that God's good hand is upon us and he is still at work. You see, this person woke up with a heavy heart because of all of the destruction in the Bahamas and the shattered lives of so many people due to Hurricane Dorian. And as I listened, I couldn't help but think about Nehemiah who must have felt the same way after hearing about his people and the destroyed walls in Jerusalem. Will God work through people around the world in big ways and small, including people right here at Hope, to accomplish his will in the Bahamas? If we truly listen to what he did through people like Nehemiah, then the answer is yes.

But it's not just disasters or facilities projects like the ones we are getting ready to embark on here at Hope that he works. It's in all our lives, each and every day that the good hand of God is accomplishing more than we will ever know on this side of heaven.

My friends, we are connected to the one who gave himself for us to make us a people of his own possession who are zealous for good works. My prayer for us all that we not only recognize this gift given to us through faith, but that we trust God works through this gift, for his good his is upon us. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**