

“Walls”

It had been less than six months since Nehemiah spoke to the king, but the wall was finished. No doubt, the speedy completion of the project was a tribute to Nehemiah’s management skills and the people’s devotion. But in the end, success was possible only with God’s help. He was there as those first two groups of exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. And he was there as Nehemiah’s group completed the wall.

And as we look at our reading today someone new enters the narrative for the first time—Ezra, the priest. And his presence is significant. Because Ezra was there as the temple was rebuilt. Now with the walls securely in place, he is able to return to his priestly office in the midst of God’s people. And what does he do? He reads God’s Word as revealed through Moses—think Genesis to Deuteronomy—to all the people. Our text paints a beautiful picture. Ezra stood above the people on a wooden platform that had been built. He opened the book. He prayed. The people responded with the words “Amen, Amen.” And he read God’s Word and helped the people understand it. To put it simply, for the first time in many years the people of Jerusalem were gathered together for worship. Obviously the God guided efforts of Nehemiah were not in vain.

But these efforts weren't just for the tired and weary few who returned to Jerusalem after a 70 plus year exile in Babylon. This was evidence of how important it is to remember that the visible church is built from generation to generation. Yes, God is behind it all. But what we can’t see in his invisible work, we can see in the visible work he gives to the people. So, just as Ezra proclaims God’s Word from within the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem, centuries later we are still doing it inside the walls of this church called Hope.

I’m reminded of something I read by the great church father, Augustine. Through a friend, Augustine heard of a prominent philosopher’s conversion to Christianity.

Augustine describes that this man read the Scriptures. After examining it all, the philosopher says to Augustine's friend in private, "Did you know that I am already a Christian?" The friend replied, "I shall not believe that or count you among the Christians until I see you in the Church of Christ." To this the philosopher laughed and said, "Then do walls make Christians?"

When we look at the Word of God through Nehemiah, then we must conclude that the answer is yes. Jerusalem is a real place and so is the church.

Nehemiah's work of rebuilding this portion of the holy land where God's Word could be proclaimed is a foretaste of what was to come. And what was it that came? Well, look around because you're sitting it! It's the visible church in which Christ is the cornerstone. The visible church in which the Holy Spirit is active creating and sustaining faith through Word and Sacrament. The visible church where the people assist in building it and maintaining it. So in a real sense, walls really do make Christians.

Because this is the place where Jesus promises to be. This is the place where he comes to his people to give them rest. It's the place where we receive his very body and blood for our forgiveness. It's the place where we listen as God says, "I baptize you in my name." It's the place where we hear the promises of our God "who loved us so much that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

I mean when we hear these truths about the church, this place should be standing room only every weekend. Don't get me wrong, we are certainly blessed with really good attendance. It's a wonderful thing, for sure. But for a lot of church going Christians in the country, and even in this congregation, someone who attends church at least once a month considers themselves to be a regular attendee. I mean, could you imagine all those gathered as Ezra read the Word of God that day—the ones whose ears were attentive—the ones who bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground in a sign of humility and repentance—skipping the next few gatherings of the assembly? "Hey Sheribiah, we missed you yesterday." "Yeah, little Hodiah had a sling shot

tournament and of course Jamin had swim lessons down at the Jordan. Plus, if I'm honest I got all the info. I need at the last gathering. God is good. We are bad. Repent and repeat. Maybe I'll see you in a few weeks." I doubt we could imagine that type of scenario, especially considering all that the people of Israel went through in order to finally worship together again.

But their wall story is our story too. They were sinners; we are sinners. They did everything they could to save themselves and when that didn't work, they ignored God all together and found themselves exiled to a foreign land. But God allowed them to return. He allowed the temple to be rebuilt, the walls to protect, and right and true worship in Jerusalem to start again. Yes, the people continued to fall away and were far from perfect. But perfect was always among them, just as he is for you and me right here. So why don't we see this as a bigger deal than a lot of other things that consume our time?

You know, a few weeks ago in my Wednesday night class, we discussed and article titled *"Do I have to go to church?"* And I want to share with you one paragraph because it's a powerful reminder of what the walls of a church like ours hold inside. Here's what the author, Dr. Dan Voorhis, wrote: *"Through His people, God creates an alternative community of grace in contrast to anything the world has to offer. As the people are the church, the church involves being born, our rites of passage, our eating, drinking, living, crying, growing and dying. And all of this centered on the narrative of the God who sacrificed himself for us while we were still his enemies. As the church, we get to tell the story of canceled debt and breaking the chains of guilt. It's the story of the divine service: from God, through Christ, to us."*¹

I love that. *As the church, we get to tell the story of canceled debt and breaking the chains of guilt. It's the story of the divine service: from God, through Christ, to us.*" That's why I love our worship here so much. Yes, we have our share of technical issues. Sometimes it's too hot or too cold. Yes, the ushers, greeters, acolytes and communion servers don't always show up. And yes, we pastors,

¹ <https://www.1517.org/articles/do-i-have-to-go-to-church>

DCEs, and even vicars make mistakes. But standing in the middle of all of our human imperfections is the perfect Christ who always shows up to give us his gifts, which cancels our debt and breaks the chains of guilt . We all take this for granted at times. Some of us have even convinced ourselves like Sheribiah who I mentioned earlier that, “we got all the info. we need at the last worship service so maybe we’ll see you in a few weeks.” But this is silly because sinners like you and me will always choose ourselves over God. But in the place where Christ promises to be, messed up people like you and me is who he chooses.

And this is good news. Because inside these walls Jesus gives us what only he can give—forgiveness, peace, hope, life today and forever with him. Inside these walls Jesus shapes us to be who he wants us to be. It is here that we learn to interpret reality through the lens of our faith in him. It is here that we learn and grow, and then go, sharing the good news of Jesus through our love and service to others.

So as our Nehemiah series concludes, I encourage to keep reading this book. You will find that now the wall is complete, time and time again the people gather together to hear the Word of the Lord and to confess his enduring mercy promised in the covenant. While they continue to make a mess of things, as all of us do, they do seem to get that they were saved by God’s grace apart from anything they did. The same of course is true for you and me. We are saved only by God’s grace, which he offers faithfully through Jesus Christ.

So maybe the next time you drive by the church in the busyness of life you will remember that very truth as you see the walls, all the cars in the parking lot, and hopefully, the cross on the top. Because God did everything to get us here. **Everything!** And he wants nothing more than for us to be here every weekend to receive his gifts.

Do walls make Christians? Technically the answer is no. But God uses what he has established within these walls, just as he did in Nehemiah’s day, to enlarge his family and keep them in the one true faith now and forever. See you next Sunday. **Amen.**