

**Christ Community Covenant Church,
Pursuing Jesus and His priorities in the world
Nehemiah 1:1-11
Pastor Dave Scherrer - January 5, 2014**

We are going to start a new series this morning: *Pursuing Jesus and his priorities in the world.* It is a saying that the Evangelical Covenant is fond of quoting and I like its implications. It sums up nicely the personal mission of the Christian. Christ said follow me, but the Greek word used here as “follow” is *akoloutheō*. *Akoloutheō* is a common word used throughout the Greek New Testament.

This idea of following is stronger than a casual hanging around. It is to follow hard after Jesus. To pursue him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength is the call of every Christian. It carries the additional meaning of assisting, which is where the term acolyte comes from, describing the attendants of the Priest in the Catholic church. This word pursue helps us understand the urgency and the passion of our following. It is part of a prospering soul to have this purpose and direction. To be intimately known by God and to intimately Know Him is what we long for. But there is purpose in the call to Him, and that is to be about His priorities.

As we look forward to our new building, we all know that simply moving to a new location won't make us more effective in reaching our community or more dedicated to righting the wrongs of the world. Our new digs won't make us better evangelists or better prayers. We must set our hope upon the reality that Jesus wants us to address the things in this world that break his heart. That is what I long to be known for here at 4Cs, that we pursue Christ and we are hard after His priorities in the world.

I believe that there is an important story in the Bible that very much reminds me of our journey over the past several years. It is the story found in the book of Nehemiah, the Old Testament account of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon where they were taken into captivity after the destruction of Jerusalem. Now you may be saying that that seems to be quite a stretch to compare our church with the decimated Jerusalem and the imprisoned Hebrews and it is of course. But there are aspects of this story that ring very familiar and true to me.

The book of Nehemiah has been one of the most shaping accounts in my life. Much of my life has been influenced by truths found in this brief historical account. The first series I preached in this church as a new Senior Pastor was from this book. And revealed in this book are the priorities of God. First and foremost the account of Nehemiah is about redemption:

God's priority is redemption

Psalm 130:7

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful *redemption*.

Ephesians 1:7

In him we have *redemption* through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

1 Corinthians 1:30

And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and *redemption*,

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but *that all should reach repentance*.

Illustration: S and H Stamps

The best living word picture for redemption I know is the book and now movie and musical movie, *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo. Written in 1840 with the backdrop of the French Revolution the themes of redemption come in waves. Our hero in the story is Jean Valjean, the criminal thrown in jail for stealing a

small loaf of bread for his sick and starving sister. Escaping prison, J Valjean is on the run and stops at a church. The Bishop Myriel gives him shelter but at night,

<http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/les-miserables/back-to-god>

Valjean runs off with Myriel's silverware. When the police capture Valjean, Myriel pretends that he has given the silverware to Valjean and presses him to take two silver candlesticks as well, as if he had forgotten to take them. The police accept his explanation and leave. Myriel tells Valjean that his life has been spared for God, and that he should use the money from the silver candlesticks to make an honest man of himself. Later when Valjean has made a name for himself as a factory owner and Mayor, he redeems Cosette the abused daughter of the his equally abused factory worker Fantene. Later he redeems a man mistakenly accused of being the fugitive Jean Valjean himself by confessing the truth in the courtroom. He escapes and continues on the run with Cosette and eventually redeems Cosette's boyfriend Marius. In a way at the end of the book even the Inspector Javert is redeemed by the honesty and integrity and selflessness of Jean Valjean. I consider it one of the five best books I have ever read.

*"The book which the reader has before him at this moment is, from one end to the other, in its entirety and details ... a progress from evil to good, from injustice to justice, from falsehood to truth, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from corruption to life; from bestiality to duty, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God. The starting point: matter, destination: the soul. The hydra at the beginning, the angel at the end."*Victor Hugo in his forward to *Les Mis*.

Redemption is an amazing phenomenon. In order for redemption to have meaning there must be a condition of despair and helplessness that can be made new and bring back to life. The book of Nehemiah is such a story; the story of the nation of Israel being restored to life again against all odds.

A dark history of despair: the captivity of Israel

Before we get too far in our narrative let's just get a brief history of the time in history dealing with the captivity of the nation of Israel. It might not be right on the top of your mind, right at this moment. I think it will help to frame our lesson for today.

The Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther belong together as a set, for they cover in general the same period of time, after the Babylonian captivity when Israel had returned to Jerusalem and had begun again the worship of *Jehovah* in the restored temple.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the Hebrew Bible. Ezra, the priest, led an early return to Israel and restored worship in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah led a later return. He was a layman, a cupbearer to the Emperor Artaxerxes I of a land now known as Iran.

Let's look at this in historic bullet points:

- 1050 BC – Saul becomes King of Israel
- 1010 BC – David becomes King of Israel
- 970 BC – Solomon become King of Israel
- 930 BC – The Kingdom divides into Israel and Judah
- 722 BC – Northern Kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria
- 586 BC – Judah falls to Babylon
- 539 BC – Babylon falls to Persia, the first wave of Jews return
- 474 BC – Esther becomes Queen of Persia
- 456 BC – Ezra returns in the second wave to rebuild the Temple
- 445 BC – Nehemiah and the third wave return and rebuild Jerusalem

Nehemiah is the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, which took place in the fifth century before Christ. It is part of the long history of that troubled city which today is still in the news, and still in trouble, as you well know. This ancient city is still surrounded by thick walls, but they are not the same walls that Nehemiah built. The walls that are there now are of a much later date. However, the famous Israeli archaeologist, Nahman Avigad, has clearly uncovered in his diggings part of the wall that Nehemiah built, still visible today 2400 years later. I want you to know that the retaining wall I build in my back yard will not be

there 2400 years from now. This book, therefore, is an historic account of the rebuilding of the walls of that great city.

But Nehemiah did more than rebuild a wall, as we will learn. This book is also the story of the restoring of a people from ruin and despair to a new walk with God. Jerusalem is not only an historic city which has for centuries been the center of the life of the nation of Israel but it is also a symbolic city. Jerusalem is also used as a living word picture given to us from God. It is the place where God initially establishes residence with humanity.

However, according to the new covenant established with Jesus Christ, the veil of the temple separating the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant was rent in two. And Jesus sent His living Holy Spirit to now dwell in us. Humankind now has the choice to be the dwelling place of God. God seeks to dwell in us. Paul's great statement in the letter to the Colossians is, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," (Colossians 1:27). This is God's provision and desire for every person.

In our account of Nehemiah, sixth century Jerusalem is in ruins, therefore, is a picture of a life that has lost its defenses against attack and lies open to repeated hurt and misery. If you are at all acquainted with the world in which we live today, you will know that every time you turn your television on you are exposed to the hurt and misery of people whose walls have been broken down. Jerusalem in ruins is a vivid picture of their danger and despair.

And not only Jerusalem, but the lives of so many of us who find ourselves in ruin, in despair; seemingly defenseless against powers and principalities that seek to lie and cheat themselves into destroying our lives. The book of Nehemiah is immanently relevant to us at 4Cs as a Body of believers who find ourselves at a crossroad, and also to us as individuals, trying to make sense and to navigate in our own personal journey through life. We all stand in need of redemption!

Nehemiah 1:1-11

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And 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, ⁶ let 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 the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Three things that remind me of our circumstances:

1. Nehemiah sees the circumstances of the despair and must personally respond as an agent of redemption

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who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,⁶ let 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 the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

We must respond as agents of redemptions, as ministries of reconciliation to our community with acts of compassion and a lifestyle of evangelism

2. Nehemiah is moved to confession and redemptive prayer

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

I long to see us moved by compassion to redemptive prayer

3. Nehemiah was willing to take risks, even his very life. You see to participate in redemption is necessarily a life sacrificing action:

¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

We have been a risky congregation and I think God is asking us to become even more courageous in our pursuit of the priorities of Christ.

Life is relentless. We too must be relentless with a holy dissatisfaction in our pursuit of Christ and the things that break his heart. We must seek redemption day by day and moment by moment. Before we enjoy the table of redemption this morning I want to share with you an old favorite of mine that I think communicates the idea of redemption like few stories:

The Rag Man by Walter

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. Hush, now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!" Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!"

"Now, this is a wonder," I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

"Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another."

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then HE began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

"This IS a wonder," I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

"Rags! Rags! New rags for old!"

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

"Give me your rag," he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine."

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood - his own!

"Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

"Are you going to work?" he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head.

The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?"

"Are you crazy?" sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket - flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

"So," said the Ragman. "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine."

Such quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman - and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

"Go to work," he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, and old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman - he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope - because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know - how could I know? - that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night, too. But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence. Light - pure, hard, demanding light - slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all.

There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: "Dress me."

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!