

WELCOME 18th July 2021 – 8 Pentecost '21 B

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Welcome! It's great to be together. As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources for you to use *over the course of the week. As God leads you into the fullness of His word/work in your life he will then introduce you to someone who needs to hear the good news from you. Also... somewhere here today you may feel a nudge - tap - tug. Don't ignore it! That's probably the Holy Spirit prompting you some way. Let's talk about that after worship.*

As we move into this week...

What hours of TV held the most viewers in the last month...?

State of Origin? No... Ash Barty's Wimbledon win? No...

It's the daily briefing by the Premier & State Health officials...The current Corona-virus rundown of cases, restrictions, updates...eyes/ears are glued by the 1000s

The nation stops...watches...holds its breath waiting to see if case #s & fatality rates are climbing falling or holding steady. We drop into suspended animation, hoping there's an end in sight to the lockdowns; waiting for someone to lay out a road to recovery that isn't cut off by a new variant or breakout or foolishness...

We're alive...not fully living...like the disastrous conditions facing the Jewish remnant who returned from exile to Jerusalem.

They were trapped in a CAPTIVITY MINDSET far from the vision God had for their lives.

Nehemiah was still in exile but his heart was burdened for those who were free but not living in freedom. He was heartbroken for those who settled into complacency amidst the chaos. But rather than blaming or shifting responsibility; Nehemiah accepts his part in the situation & lives the truth of Isaiah's words **"In** *repentance & rest is your salvation; in quietness & trust is your strength...*" – Is 30:15

The Road to Recovery begins with Repenting of the Rubbish & turning our eyes to the one who alone is faithful to all his promises & can lead this nation & his church to full recovery.

*But if you return to me & obey my commands & live by them,
then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth¹*

I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'

We'll experience & share that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

God who created tiny viruses & giant stars...Forgive us when we think the well-being of the world rests in our hands. Forgive us when we believe the Church's problems & the world's dilemmas are ours to solve. Forgive us when we fail to remember that even the smallest act of compassion in your name can grow into the largest blessing to someone else.

O God, you set us free in Jesus Christ with a power greater than all that would keep us captive. By your strength make us live boldly & gracefully in our freedom & invite others to join us in your love.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord...Amen.

Let's be encouraged by some music

FAITH CHAT:

1. When life gets hard, what's your "escape"? What do you do for "comfort"?
2. "Rubble" happens when our protections/securities fail. Where would you say there's "rubble" in your life right now?

8 Pentecost – '21 B – ROAD TO RECOVERY: REPENT OF THE RUINS

Last month, I shared on our LW website the story of Juneteenth...the newest national holiday in the US...It commemorates June 19th 1865: the day Maj Gen Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, TX w/ a small detachment of soldiers & announced the public freeing of slaves in Texas...the last of the slaves of the Confederacy were finally told they were free men & women after the Civil War ended.

Historians note it as a strange event, because they were already free & had been since 1 Jan 1863 when Pres Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation; or at least since 9 May 1865 when the Civil War ended. But no one told them until Gen Granger came to TX w/ formal notice & made sure everyone knew what was in effect from now on. Freedom was the new reality for everyone.

But then something stranger happened...not just in TX but throughout the former slave-holding states. Many slaves stayed right where they were...w/ their former masters. They didn't reject freedom & they were even paid a subsistence wage for any work they did...but many did not immediately take advantage of the "40 acres & a mule" offered freely to any former slave who chose to make a go of freedom as a free man They were free, but in many respects did not fully live their freedom.

Welcome to Nehemiah's world. As the scene opens in Neh 1, Neh is serving King Artaxerxes as a PA/bodyguard (food/poison taster)...still in captivity when he hears that the Israelites who have been freed to go home to Jerusalem/Judah are still living as if they were in exile...as a conquered demoralized vanquished people. Although Nehemiah would have been born in captivity, he was well aware that when Babylon fell to the Persian/Median reign, subsequent kings had sent the Israelites back to their homeland to rebuild their nation & reignite their worship in a degree of measured freedom. They were subject to the Persians/Medes but they were to live out their lives in devotion to Yahweh/the God of their ancestors & become a people devoted solely to Him again. Free...but not living it.

Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity & about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in **great trouble & disgrace**. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, & the gates have been destroyed by fire."

♫ 75-90 yrs have passed since Judah was conquered by Babylon. 1000s killed. More 1000s taken captive. Jerusalem burned to the ground. Temple destroyed stone by stone. Only a tiny remnant left behind...those deemed too useless for slavery.

But over the last 12-20 yrs, Babylon had fallen to a stronger empire: Medes/Persians **AND** as Isaiah prophesied, Cyrus, then Darius released all the Jews who wanted to go home to rebuild & restore their nation. But although they laid a foundation for the new Temple & began to offer sacrifices & worship God according to the OT Law they remain vulnerable, exposed to attack...comfortable & complacent among the ruins & rubble of the formerly glorious city. They live w/ a "captivity mindset" that is beneath the vision of God for their lives & far far below their status as God's chosen people. *What's a captivity mindset?* This'll do. It's just going to be like this. We can't change anything. As good as it gets I guess.

Complacent resignation to powerlessness as if exile never ended; as if their slavery still existed. The assumption that ruin is inevitable...rubble is normal...but rebuilding beyond imagination. Not just being stuck in a rut...but believing "rut" is ok. Captivity mindset believes someone else is responsible for the mess & the clean-up. Today, tomorrow & next year are always going to be a slog...but never attempting change. Doing the same thing over & over again expecting different results.

The verdict on that: They are in **great trouble & disgrace**. When God's people live anything other than the life they've been given by God...live bondage not freedom, despair not hope, sorrow not delight, sullen not joyful, complacency not conviction...IT'S. A. DISGRACE. Paul would say, "*The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.*" Rather than our lives pointing to the grandeur glory & sovereign rule of the Father...they call attention instead to his people's cowardice complacency captivity & contentment w/ chaos...

Which is why over & over again the NT calls us to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. - Eph 4:1 - walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work & increasing in the knowledge of God.- Col 1:10 let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ... - Php 1:27 We have to remember As the armies of Babylon were plundering Jerusalem & taking captives thousands of Ks into slavery, Jeremiah had offered this word as an encouragement: This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: "Build homes, & plan to stay. Plant gardens, & eat the food they produce. Marry & have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! Work for the peace & prosperity of the city **where I sent you** into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." – Jer 29:4-7 WHERE I SENT YOU Captivity wasn't an accident. Exile didn't happen because God fell asleep @ the switch.

Their rebelliousness was an affront to his holiness. Their idolatry was a direct challenge to his faithfulness. They were **SENT** to Babylon ^{w/} a purpose: to demonstrate God's fidelity to his Word & his sovereignty over all things...even defeat & destruction... that he could even use foreign nations to accomplish his will for his people & his world. NOW...Their **FREEDOM** was to reveal the depth of his grace & restoring forgiveness... & the rubble & ruin & their complacency in it multiplied the disgrace of their previous faithlessness...and it needed to change.

Coronavirus did not sneak past God. That illness did not strike because God was watching MAFS instead of keeping an eye on us. Lockdown is not supposed to be a lifestyle. Quarantine is not designed as the status quo. Silence instead of singing is not our natural God-called posture...Just hanging on is not the essence of the mission of Jesus through his church... So Nehemiah does what...?

When *I heard this, I sat down & wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, & prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great & awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him & obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down & see me praying night & day for your people Israel. I confess we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family & I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, & regulations you gave us through your servant Moses. Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me & obey my commands & live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'*"

Neh is still in captivity, but his heart is burdened for those who live ^{w/} genuine hope...for those who are complacent/content ^{w/} chaos & ruin & rubble...Neh was still in exile but his heart was crushed for those who were free but not living in freedom. But rather than blaming or shifting responsibility; Nehemiah accepts his part in the situation & lives the truth of Isaiah's words *"In repentance & rest is your salvation; in quietness & trust is your strength..."* – Is 30:15

The ROAD TO RECOVERY begins not ^{w/} bemoaning our circumstance or by wallowing comfortably in it but by honestly acknowledging that in too many circumstances we are more comfortable ^{w/} fear than ^{w/} steadfast faith...^{w/} allowing the world to call the shots for our lives - children - work - relationships – finances – our faith...& like Neh GUILTY. Too easily accommodating to what's culturally acceptable or personally easy Too comfortable or complacent in the safe secure stable...Yet in that confession & acknowledgement I hear the promise...*I will bring you back...*because a CAPTIVITY MINDSET is far from the vision God has for us...

My daily Bible reading has me in Psalms & Revelation right now...Ps 12:6-8 reads: **The** *promises of the Lord are pure, like silver refined in a furnace; purified seven times over. Therefore, Lord, we know you will protect us, preserving us from this generation forever; even though the wicked strut about, & evil is praised throughout the land.* In spite of our surroundedness we know & declare: in Christ alone sent by the Father to redeem us & working through the Spirit to refine us God's promises to be present ^{w/} us to provide for us & to protect us are pure & can be trusted no matter what.

Here's the exciting thing... While Nehemiah's praying, his **burden** for Jerusalem **became greater** & his **vision of what needed to be done became clearer**. Repenting of the rubbish allows you heart & your head to work together so your burden & passion don't make you run ahead of God & make matters worse: **The** *people you rescued by your great power & strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."*

Neh began to glimpse the cost of real freedom for himself & for God's people...if they were to live fully the gift God had given them & demonstrate his grace to the surrounding nations. Neh would **himself** have to get in the game...The king's cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort & security of the palace for the harsh danger of life in a ruined city. Luxury would be replaced by ruins, & prestige by ridicule/slander/threat. Instead of sharing the king's bounties, Neh would personally pay to feed & care for scores of people who would eat at his table. He would leave behind the ease of the palace & take up the toil & tears of leading & encouraging a complacent people to complete an seemingly impossible task.

**God has called Living Water Fellowship
to be a vibrant Christian community
that glorifies God
by inviting all people to become disciples of Jesus
who grow in his grace and
go in his power
to show his love to the world.**

If that's what true freedom in Christ looks like for us...how we demonstrate God's immeasurable grace & redeeming love to this city...

Take it home...

This week when you pray for Living Water...of what will you repent & to what will you pledge your life? 30 secs... **Go...**I'll pray for us to close...