Rebuilding Through Worship

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[0:00] Well, good morning to all of you, especially if you're joining us for the first time. I love when we do baptisms because we not only is it one of my favorite things we do, but we get to welcome people who aren't normally a part of our church.

So if that is you, welcome to friends and family who are here for that. This is a special Sunday for a couple of reasons. I mean, first of all, obviously, I've had a lot of conversations and talked to a lot of people and read a lot of articles about the amount of stress that people feel over the upcoming election this week.
There's a sense of existential dread in the air. Some people are worried about the economy. Some people are worried about the fact that it feels like the world is on the brink of another war. Some people are worried about the fragility of our democracy.
Whatever that is, a lot of people are stressed. One article said that one in five people are reporting significant sleep disruption over this upcoming election. And so it's wreaking havoc on people psychologically.
And this is really happening across the spectrum. People on both sides of the aisle are really being affected by this. Of course, I've talked to other people who maybe in response to all that stress have sort of gone the other way.
[1:15] They're disengaging. It's almost as though they're deciding to remain or pretend as though it's not happening. I would suggest that both approaches represent a bit of a distorted perspective.

And that leads us into the second reason this is a special Sunday. I'm always delighted and grateful and thankful beyond measure that the way the church calendar aligns with the calendar of our country, every time we have a big election like the one coming up, just a few days before it, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints.
And I'm always so thankful for that. Right before we all go to the polls, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. In other words, we take time to celebrate the fact that all of God's people, past, present, and future, are spiritually connected.
That we are part of a great spiritual family that continues into eternity, well beyond the lifespan of our country, well beyond the lifespan of the world in its present state.
And even though I think a lot of Christians, including me, we all tend to forget this, being a part of the communion of saints makes it possible for us to have a unique perspective on this life and on this world, on things like elections.
[2:37] In other words, it allows us to be fully engaged in something like an election without the fear and anxiety that often come with that.

And if you want to know more about what I'm talking about, that's what we're going to be exploring a bit this morning as we look at Nehemiah chapter 7. You may think, well, that's a random place to go. Well, we're in a series in Nehemiah, and it just so happens that some of the themes in this chapter speak to this larger idea that we've just opened up.
So we're going to look a bit at the context of what's happening, and then we are going to draw out a couple of implications for us here today. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your presence in our midst.
We don't need to ask for you to be with us. We simply need to become aware that you are here. And thank you that you're the kind of God who wants to speak to us, and you want a relationship with us. You want to know us.
You want us to know your love, Lord. And that's why we're here. It's because you created us for relationship with yourself. I pray that through your word, we would come to know you and your heart more deeply and clearly and fully.

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[3:45] And that even more than that, we would experience you, that we might even come face to face with your son, Jesus. We know that all of these words point to him. And Lord, we pray in his name.

Amen. So first of all, this is going to require a bit of context just to bring everybody up to speed. God sent his people into exile.
He said he was going to do it. And eventually through the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, he did it. Jerusalem is destroyed and God's people go into exile and they are called to live in exile in Babylon.
And God calls them to have a very unique relationship with Babylon. He wants them to be in the city, to plant gardens and build houses and let your kids get married and get jobs and settle in.
But don't be of the city. He wanted them to remain faithful to him and to pray to the city, pray for the city, to God and to seek the welfare of the city until he brings them home, which he promised to do after 70 years.
[4:45] So he says, while you're in exile, seek the welfare of the place where I've sent you. Remain faithful to me until I bring you home. Just as God had promised, eventually the Babylonian exile does come to an end.

The Persians conquer the Babylonians. They allow God's people to begin to return home. But the problem is the city of Jerusalem, the focal point of their entire identity as a people group, lies in ruins.
So it needs to be rebuilt. So God raises up a number of leaders. Zerubbabel, Ezra. Our focus is on Nehemiah. And he calls Nehemiah to do a couple of things.
He wants Nehemiah to lead in the physical rebuilding of God's city and in the spiritual rebuilding of God's people. And as we have seen in this series over the last few weeks, this is hard work.
And Nehemiah faces opposition and challenges without and within virtually the entire time they are working together. The work has been hard until finally we get to these wonderful words in Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 15.
[5:47] So the wall was finished. Can you imagine Nehemiah writing his memoir and finally getting to write that? So the wall was finished. I hope he took a huge nap after that because up until now it's been nonstop challenges.

It says it was finished on the 25th day of the month Elul in 52 days. So beginning in chapter 7, we begin to see the fulfillment of God's promise.
God's people are returning from exile and they're coming back to live in the holy city of Jerusalem once more. And you say, well, what does this have to do with us?
We're living, what, 2,400 years after this happened? Well, since God is the author of the Bible, ultimately through dozens and dozens of authors, God is ultimately the author, the story of Nehemiah is actually part of a larger story.
And Nehemiah is actually a preview of a much greater leader who would come, Jesus Christ. And so because of that, the story of Israel in the Old Testament is actually a preview of the story of the church that we began to read about in the New Testament and that we continue to live out in our lives today.
[7:07] So when we look at this story, even though it's old, it has a lot to say about our present time and context. This is why, by the way, when the apostle Peter writes his letter to the early Christians who are experiencing persecution and opposition under the Roman government, right, lots of different administrations.

You have the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and then you have the Persians, right, and then you have the Greeks, and then you have the Romans, bam, bam, bam. Most of the time, God's people are just hoping to be left alone, hoping to be ignored.
Sometimes you have governments that try to use them. Sometimes you have governments that try to kill them. So they're experiencing persecution under the Romans, and Peter addresses his letter to the exiles, those who are elect exiles.
And all through the letter, he instructs them how to live faithfully during their time of exile. So what does that tell us? Well, the Babylonian exile ended, right?
So in one sense, the exile has come to an end, at least for the Israelites in Babylon. But on a much deeper, more profound level, we are all still in exile.

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[8:17] That's what Peter is saying in his letter. The Babylonian exile ended, but Peter is talking about a different kind of exile, a spiritual exile. In other words, this world as it is now is not our home.

This world is not our home. We were made to live in a world where we have constant communion with God in a world that is free from evil and suffering.
But at some point along the way, we chose to try to be like God rather than to worship God. And because of that, the world is broken. Because of that, we as human beings are alienated.
We are profoundly alienated from God and from one another and from the world and even from ourselves. And so what scripture teaches is that until God makes all things new, we as human beings are living in exile.
We're living in a world that is not our home. And the sooner we embrace that truth, the sooner our lives will start to make sense.
[9:23] It explains why you're never going to find a job that perfectly fulfills you. It explains why you're never going to find a spouse who is your soulmate or a marriage where all of your needs are met.

It explains why you're never going to find a lifestyle that brings total peace and contentment. No matter what choices we make, there will always be that itch.
There will always be that nagging discontentment. There will always be that uncertainty, that longing for something more. It's always going to be there. What if I had married someone else? What if I had stayed single? What if we had gotten married later or earlier? Should I stay in the house I'm in or should I move to a different house in a different neighborhood?
Should I stay in D.C. another year or should I move somewhere else in the country? Should I move closer to be my family? Should I move further away from my family? Am I in the right job or should I make a change?
[10:26] Should I go for a different position in the company or should I actually just change careers altogether? What's the average number of pivots people make? Surely I could change careers and still make a go of it. Am I in the right church or should I move to a different church?

I like the music better there. I like the preaching better there. I like their approach to care better. I like the liturgy. I hate the liturgy. Should I make a change? Is contentment just around the corner? Right? These are the things that we think and we all think them. And we need to recognize that longing and that discontentment for what it really is. It's homesickness.
It's homesickness. Now, I'm not saying that there aren't good times and reasons to make changes. Plenty of times there are. But underneath all of this, we need to understand that no matter what changes we make, no matter what decisions we make, there will always be that sense of homesickness.
That's what it is to be in exile. You're not in your home. And so you're homesick. You're longing for that home. This is what C.S. Lewis famously called that inconsolable longing.
[11:36] And he said, for those of us who feel it, because it's a spiritual exile, we're longing for a place that we've never visited. Right? We're longing for the scent of a flower that we've never actually seen.

We're longing for something that we can't even really fully describe, but we know it's not this. That's what it is to be in exile. And since we are in exile, God's instructions to his people in the Babylonian exile still apply to us.
We're called to be in the world, but not of the world. We're called to seek the welfare of the place where God has sent us while remaining faithful to him until he calls us home. I think I would suggest that's a helpful way to think about the upcoming election.
You know, voting is simply one of many ways we can seek the welfare of the place where God has sent us while we are here. If this world is not our home, why would we expect to have presidential candidates or legislators or local officials who fully believe and embrace and reflect our way of life as Christians?
Certainly that wasn't a case for Nehemiah under the Persians. We can engage. We can participate in politics, but we have nothing to fear. For those of us who are Christians, we have a king.
[12:54] His name is Jesus. Right? Administrations come and go. As I said, you know, you have the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Greeks and the Romans and the Persians and the Democrats and the Republicans and whatever comes next.

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Right? Some are indifferent. Some want to use us. Some want to persecute us. It doesn't matter. At the end of the day, Jesus remains on the throne of heaven.
Jesus is our king. So this Tuesday, for those of us who are going out to the polls to quote Pope Francis, we're merely voting for whomever we believe to be the lesser evil.
We're voting for those we believe will do the best job of handling the complex issues and problems that we're facing right now domestically and abroad. We're trusting that God can work through human governments.
He can work in spite of human governments. More than anything, I would say we're committing to prayer. We're praying for the health and the state of our democracy.
[13:55] We're praying for whichever candidate prevails. We commit to praying for our leaders, which we do every week, because we're exiles and we're seeking the welfare of this place while God has us here. So the first point is simply this fact that we are still in exile.

The sooner we embrace that, the sooner our lives and our longings start to make sense. The second implication is this. And there's only two implications.
This has a couple of parts. Second implication is this. Number one, we're still in exile. Number two, one day our exile will end. Amen to that.
Right? The end of the exile in Nehemiah is just a tiny preview. It's just a glimpse of the fact that one day our spiritual exile in this world will come to an end. And just as Jerusalem was rebuilt, one day the world will be rebuilt.
In fact, here's how the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, describes that day. Listen to this description. Revelation chapter 21. Then, John says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.
[15:09] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. Listen to this. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.
Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. For the former things have passed away. This, my friends, is a description of our true home.
That's where we belong, and we know it in our hearts. Knowing that this day will come, knowing that one day we will be there together in the communion of saints, that shifts our perspective.
And when we have that exile perspective, it begins to reorder our priorities. Right? If you believe that this is all there is, you're going to have one set of priorities.
[16:22] But if you understand that this is simply a moment in time, but we will spend eternity in our home, you have a very different set of priorities.

It reorders your priority. So, Nehemiah 7, as we look at this return from exile, it helps us envision what our priorities should be as we await our return from exile.
Number one, we see that Nehemiah prioritizes worship. And in particular, he prioritizes corporate worship. It says in verse 1, Now, when the wall had been built, and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah, the governor of the castle, charge over Jerusalem.
Now, before Nehemiah appoints, here's what I want you to see. Before Nehemiah appoints political leaders, before he appoints Hanani and Hananiah, who's sort of like the head of homeland security, before he appoints those leaders, he makes sure the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites are in place.
All three roles are involved in the worshiping life of God's people. The gatekeepers were not just involved in security.
[17:43] If you jump forward to Nehemiah 13, you see what their actual job was. The gatekeepers are there to make sure that on the Sabbath day, no pagan merchants are allowed into the city to do business, which will take away from and distract from and violate the Sabbath.

They wanted to make sure that they had a full day of uninterrupted rest and worship, and that was the gatekeeper's job, to make sure that nothing intrudes on the Sabbath. The singers were to lead in the adoration of God.
Not hard to imagine that, given what we've just experienced. The Levites, in the post-exilic period, served as pastors and teachers. They helped people to understand and apply God's Word.

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So Nehemiah is prioritizing creating a culture of corporate worship. And he does that before he even appoints the political leaders. Now, why is that the case?
Well, it's because Nehemiah knows that although the city has been restored, the people need to be spiritually restored. And he knows this about us. Unless he prioritizes regular corporate worship, they're going to end up worshiping other things.
[18:55] Because he knows that we are made to worship. Human beings can't help but worship. That's how we're designed. So either we worship God, or we end up worshiping something else, whether it is comfort, or wealth, or approval, or safety, or any of the other number of things that are good, but that we allow to become a little too important in our lives.

We are made to worship. So Nehemiah recognizes, number one, in view of the exile, and our return from exile, we need to be prioritizing regular corporate worship. Now, worship is something that we can do on our own anytime, absolutely, as we should.
But in order to sustain a life of worship, we needed a community around us to help us do that, right? We need people who are gifted to help us understand and apply Scripture.
We need people to help us lead us in the adoration of God's Word. We need the voices of the saints around us, affirming what we affirm, singing what we're singing. We need that sense that we're a part of that greater communion, that greater witness.
That's how worship is meant to be enacted. Here's the question for us. Are we willing and able to be gatekeepers in our own lives when it comes to corporate worship?
[20:13] You know, when we lay out our calendar for the coming week or month or year, however you do your planning, there are a lot of competing priorities and commitments that we have to navigate.

We have professional commitments and travel. We have vacation and recreational activities. We have housework and family responsibilities. We have kids' sports. Somewhere in there, we have church involvement.
So the question is simply, where is that on the list? Do we set aside first the time that we want to spend worshiping in community and then fill in the other commitments around that, or do we do the opposite?
Do we simply kind of go to church whenever we happen to be in town and there's no competing commitment? It's something worth considering. And I say that as a family with kids who are involved in sports, and we both have to travel a lot for our work, and we know the challenges of navigating that.
But the question is, where is the priority list? And what's at the top of that list? Also, I've been thinking a lot about what we allow into our lives on the Sabbath and what we keep out.
[21:21] For instance, could we as a community adopt or rather commit together to going totally screen-free on the Sabbath? What if you just knew that all of your friends, all of their kids, everybody you know who's a part of this church, that we know that it's just normative that we're screen-free on the Sabbath?

Just putting it out there. What are we allowing to intrude into our Sabbath, and what are we keeping out? Are we being gatekeepers? Number two, what we see in Nehemiah, thinking about our priorities.
He prioritizes corporate worship. He prioritizes godly stewardship. Starting in verse 70, we see a couple of things that are very important. First, during their time of exile, God had enabled some of the families to become very wealthy.
So exile doesn't mean living in abject poverty for everybody. For some people, they got quite wealthy, and they were very successful in Babylon. Some of us in this time of exile, in this world, we've become very successful.
God has created amazing opportunities. For us, we've been greatly blessed in that way. So first, during their time of exile, God had enabled some to become wealthy.
[22:36] Second, what we see is that they're giving sacrificially to the work in Jerusalem. They had not yet really even had time to get established in Jerusalem. These are families who, some of them, don't even have houses.

It says that one of the problems is that the wall has been built, but there's a lot of homes that haven't been built yet. And for all, of course, is for a while. The dimension was referred with Lazarus in the original public■■■ and, of course, is aendism.

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Now though there's a ■■ and purchase himself, how much is it suitable for of today? Of course, there's a necessity to getoff. Over the time of exile, why?

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