

A Holy Discontent

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning to you all. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here, and I love this Sunday every year. This is a Sunday in our church that we have come to unofficially refer to as Launch Sunday. It's when people start to come back from their summer travel, when all of our ministry programming starts back up, our children's ministry starts up. And so we've called it Launch Sunday for years now, and I love it. I love, as I look forward to the fall, every year I get excited. This year in particular, I'm excited as I look across the months to come. The coming year is going to be a very unique time in the life of our church. And that's, to go back a little bit, that's because of where we are in our story.

We started this church back in 2007 in a living room, and we started with a commitment to seek the good of the city for the glory of God, to love the city long term. And by city, I mean the greater DMV region. And since then, we've been sort of wandering in the wilderness, you might say.

We've had to move seven different times. That's probably been the greatest obstacle to us fulfilling that commitment to love the city for the glory of God. And so six years ago, we started praying together and asking God to lead us to a permanent home in the heart of the city where we could make a commitment to loving the city for generations. And we wanted a space that would allow us to be true to this commitment in a way that would outlive all of us. And thanks be to God, through an incredible movement of generosity from many people in this room, we now own a beautiful historic church space in the Shaw neighborhood, right in the heart of the city. And so this year, not only are we going to continue to do all of the wonderful ministry and things that happen in the life of this church, but it's also a year of preparation. It's a year of transition. It's a year where we're going to turn a corner and enter a new season of life and ministry together. So in this time of preparation, we're going to be working on the one hand to renovate the building so that we can move in next year. And you're going to be hearing more about that in the weeks to come. But we're also, equally if not more importantly, going to be doing the work of spiritual renovation, a spiritual renovation, seeking God's vision for the next chapter of our life together, seeking to be spiritually renovated and renewed in our own hearts and in our community.

And so along those lines, we're going to spend the next several months, this will actually take us up to the beginning of the Advent season, looking at the book of Nehemiah. We're going to take a break from the lectionary, and we're going to follow the story of Nehemiah. And on the one hand, this is about someone who lived roughly 2,500 years ago. And you say, well, what does that possibly have to do with where we are today? What we find is the Bible is timeless. And because of that, it can be very timely in the way it applies to the here and now. And there are a lot of parallels between this story and our story and where we are in our story. And so I think there's a lot we can learn if we're willing to put ourselves under the authority of this book. So we're going to be looking at the first few verses this morning, Nehemiah chapter 1, verses 1 through 4. It's printed in the bulletin on page 11, and you have a little bit more of that chapter there for context. But we're just going to be looking at the first four verses. We're going to look at Nehemiah's vision, and then we're going to ask, how does that inform and shape and speak to our vision and where we're going as a community? So let's pray. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, we thank you for the ministry that you're already doing in our midst. We thank you for your faithfulness to us over all the years. We thank you that you're here this morning and that your Word is living and active. And we know that you speak to your people.

And we know that even more than food, as your Word says, we need to hear from you. We need your Word, Lord. That we're not meant to live on bread alone, but we need the Word of God, Lord. We need you to do your work in us. If we are in need of comfort, I pray that you would comfort us. If we need to be challenged or convicted, we pray that your Word would do that, Lord. In all these ways, we pray that you would do your work through your Word in us. For your glory and in your Son's name, amen.

[4 : 28] Amen. So first of all, let's just look at what's happening here and where Nehemiah's vision comes from. A little history just to get us all on the same page. God had originally established the nation of Israel for a very particular purpose. He called this nation to be a light to the nations. His desire was that Israel would be the means through which He would bless all the nations of the earth.

But as you follow along the story in the Old Testament, His people became increasingly unfaithful. And instead of being a blessing to the nations, they increasingly became like the nations. And they worshiped idols instead of God. So skipping over a lot of history and a lot of ups and downs of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, some kings being wonderful and some kings being horrible, right?

Ups and downs. We finally get to a point where God essentially says, okay, if you want idols that badly, I'm going to bury you in idols. I'm going to give you more idols than you know what to do with.

And He allows first Assyria and then the Babylonians to come in and to conquer His people. In 586 BC, God allows the Babylonians to conquer Judah. And they destroy the city of Jerusalem. They capture most of the citizens and they take them a thousand miles away from their homeland to be dirt farmers in Babylon. But then as history goes, the Babylonians were eventually conquered by the Persians.

And we read in the book of Ezra that God moves in the heart of the king, Cyrus, to begin allowing the Jews to return as He had promised to begin to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem.

[6 : 18] So we read about the first part of that in the book of Ezra and the rebuilding of the temple. And this brings us in history up to the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a young professional.

He is living in a major urban center. He's at Susa, which is one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire. It's where they would spend the winter months because the climate was better. And he is working for the administration. He works for Artaxerxes, who's the king of Persia. He has a pretty important job, and we'll learn more about that next week. Nehemiah has lived his entire life in exile. He's grown up in exile. He's grown up hearing about his homeland, but only stories that his grandparents might tell. But he knows that the Jews are returning. He knows there's been a couple of waves of Jews returning to try to rebuild Jerusalem, the temple and the city. So when one of his brothers and some friends return from a trip to the homeland, Nehemiah is very eager to hear how things are going in Jerusalem. But the news is not good. Hanani says, things are awful, great trouble and shame. The walls are broken down, the gates destroyed by fire. The people are destitute and suffering. And if we look back in the book of Ezra, that tells us why this is the case. There's an external challenge and an internal challenge. The external challenge comes in the form of a corrupt pagan government and a culture of hostility. King Artaxerxes, the king Nehemiah served, had halted work in Jerusalem when he first took office 20 years earlier. And he did that because as much as they wanted to practice religious tolerance, they also didn't want to allow any one group to get too powerful because that might be a threat to his power. And so he halted work. He said, you know, things are going a little too well. Let's slow it down a bit. And then the surrounding tribes, none of whom liked the Israelites at all, they took advantage of this lack of government protection, and they came in and they destroyed whatever work had been done. So that's the external challenge. The internal problem comes in the form of widespread unfaithfulness among God's own people.

So there's sort of corruption and persecution from the outside, and then there's widespread unfaithfulness on the inside. So Nehemiah hears about all of this, and how does he respond? And this is what we see in the passage that we're looking at. It says in verse 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. So he is heartbroken over the brokenness. And the first thing he does is to pray because he knows that the only one who can restore the brokenness is God. And we can imagine him crying out and asking God, what do you want to do through me in this city? The brokenness is so great, and I'm so small. What do you want to possibly do through me in this city? How can I be a part of the work that you're doing to restore what is broken? And out of that time of prayer and fasting, God gives Nehemiah a vision. And what we see is that Nehemiah essentially gives the rest of his life to this vision. He dedicates his life to two things, to physically rebuilding the city of God, to spiritually rebuilding the people of God. And he does both at the same time.

And throughout the book, you really see the rebuilding of the wall and the city as an almost metaphorical parallel with the rebuilding of God's people. Nehemiah devotes himself to both. And that's really what the rest of the book is about. Now, I want to ask what this has to do with us. How does it connect to us? Now, remember, Israel was supposed to be the light of the world, right? Jerusalem was supposed to be a city on a hill. If you imagine being in the darkness and it's nighttime and you're in the wilderness and you're looking for some shelter or refuge, and you imagine off in the distance up on a hill where it's not blocked by any other hills, you see all of the lights of a great city radiating out into the darkness. And in that moment, if you're lost and wandering in the wilderness, that would represent all of the hope and life that you could possibly hope for, right?

And so he says, originally, we see that Jerusalem was supposed to be that city on a hill, the light shining out into the darkness, offering hope to the world. But in Matthew chapter 5, right, this is hundreds of years after it's become clear that Israel and Jerusalem failed to do that. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus is talking to his disciples. And here's what Jesus says. Now, imagine the crowds are gathered on the hillside, and his disciples gather around him, and Jesus begins to teach. And here's what he says. You are the light of the world. You are a city set on a hill which cannot be hidden.

[11 : 38] You are the light of the world. You are the city on a hill. He's not talking about Israel. He's not talking about Jerusalem. He's talking about his followers. He's talking about what will come to be known as the church. In other words, what we see here is Jesus taking his place in the history of God's faithfulness and God's work in the world as what we might call the true and better Nehemiah.

Jesus is essentially saying, I have come to do what Nehemiah never could have done. I've come to accomplish what Israel and Jerusalem never could have accomplished. And when we compare them, we see this parallel. Like Nehemiah, Jesus looked and saw all the brokenness of the world, and he saw the failure of Israel to be what God called her to be, and it broke his heart. Like Nehemiah, he devoted himself to rebuilding and restoring all that is broken. But Jesus goes even further than Nehemiah could have.

He actually is willing to give his life on the cross to defeat the very source of brokenness, which is sin and death. So what Jesus is building will last for eternity. What Jesus is building is never going to fade. And what is Jesus building? Right? Jesus is building the church. His primary mission, his primary means of bringing renewal to the world is through the community of people who follow him.

Right? He says to Peter in Matthew chapter 16, after Peter confesses him to be the Christ, he says, on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. What I'm building is never going to crumble. It's never going to burn. So the church is the new and better light to the world. The church is the new and better city on a hill. St. Augustine writes about this in his book, *The City of God*. I say book. It's actually a lot of books. It's a lot of volumes. But he writes in *The City of God* that in our world there are two cities that coexist one on top of the other at the same time. The first is what he refers to as the city of man. This is earthly society, which is characterized by the love of self and the prioritizing of self over others and God. The earthly city of man is marked by self-interest.

It's marked by pride. It's marked by the pursuit of pleasure and worldly achievements and wealth and power. Right? Think of the D.C. region. Think of the culture we live in. Think of the primary reason that most people move here. Typically, it is for some opportunity, some hope for connection and networks and opportunities for education, career advancement. There's a lot of reasons people come here, and many of them very legitimate, but connected to the core values that hold sway in this region. And then Augustine says, within the city of man, there is another city, the city of God.

[14 : 56] In the midst of the city of man, you have this other city, this alternate community of people who love and follow Jesus, of people whose lives are marked by holiness and by righteousness and by justice and compassion, people who show the rest of the world what things would be like, what things could be like if everyone loved and followed Jesus, if everyone lived lives of obedience to God.

They put that kind of alternate reality on display. So they use things like sex and money and power in radically different ways. They engage politics. They talk about things like sex and gender. They handle conflict and relationships. They treat the poor in ways that look radically different from the surrounding community. They put an alternate way of life on display, a life that doesn't glorify the idols of the earthly city of man, a life that glorifies God and God alone. This is the city of God that exists within the city of man. And the church we see, the church, the community of Christ followers, is called to be a city within the city, the city of God existing within the city of man.

So as we read through Nehemiah this fall, it's tempting to see this simply as an urban renewal project or a building project. And in one sense it is, and in one sense we can apply it that way.

But what we should really see when we see Jerusalem in this story, what we should really see is we should see the church. What Nehemiah is called to do is to build a home for God's people in the midst of this greater Persian empire, right? But he's trying to build a home for God's people. He's trying to build a place where they can come and worship and study the Scriptures and pray together and live lives of holiness and in those ways to begin to be a light to the surrounding community, right? He's attempting to build a home that will make it possible for them to be that city within a city, right? And we'll talk about this more in the weeks to come, but for them to be able to do that, they need walls and they need gates, right? They need walls that allow them to be a culture that is set apart, right? To be a countercultural community, but they also need big open gates so that they can go out into the world and so that they can welcome people in. They need both walls and gates, and that's what they're rebuilding. But the purpose is to be a home for God's people so that they can be a city within the city. And this is the whole reason our church is here alongside with other gospel-centered churches throughout the area. We are essentially here to build a city within a city. And that's essentially what we're here to do. And so this year in particular, I think that we are standing in the shoes of Nehemiah because, as I said at the beginning, he dedicated himself to physically rebuilding the city of God and to spiritually rebuilding the people of God. And as we look at the year to come, we're doing the same thing. We're doing the same thing. I mean, by God's grace, we have this beautiful church building in the heart of the city, and so we are quite literally doing a building project. We are working to physically renovate that space to prepare it so that we can move in. We have essential work we have to do, like removing hazardous material and putting it in HVAC and doing basic things that will allow us to safely welcome people in to that space.

So we're doing the work of physical renovation, but we also need to do the work of spiritual renovation. We need to prepare ourselves for the mission that God has for us.

[18 : 56] No matter how nice a building we have, it will mean nothing. It will mean nothing without a community that understands what it means to inhabit that space for the glory of God. And so we have to take seriously the work of spiritual renovation. And friends, it has been a full year, right?

If we look back to when we closed in January, I will just say personally, in 17 plus years of ministry as a head pastor of Church of the Advent, this has been the single hardest year of my entire ministry. And I don't think that there's a coincidence there. I don't think that when we put down a commitment and we say we're going to commit to bringing the gospel in this way, in this space, and we're going to give ourselves to this, I don't think that it's a coincidence that there's an enormous wave of opposition that comes spiritually. And so this has been an incredibly challenging year.

There's been an enormous amount of challenge and division in our church, of slander and gossip, and seemingly irreconcilable conflict in our church. But there's also been, right alongside that, incredible fruit. We heard some testimonies at the children and youth ministry training yesterday of ways that God has been working over years to raise people up and call them into ministry to love and to serve our children. And so we see this incredible fruit. We see this incredible opening of doors in the Shaw neighborhood, people who are excited to welcome a church in, people who can't wait to be a part of what we're doing. I've been overwhelmed at that. And then there's also been overwhelming challenges. And I think in the life of the church, typically when you're seeing a lot of fruit, you're also going to see a lot of opposition, right? If you're not seeing any fruit, then probably very little opposition. But when you're seeing a lot of fruit and when you're seeing God really doing things and working in the lives of His people, you're going to see opposition.

And along with all of this, the good and the bad, the simple reality is there's a lot of change, and change is hard. Even the best change, even change that we all know we should want, change is hard. It's hard when things that we are used to are different. And it can be destabilizing and disorienting, and we can feel disoriented. And this is a year where, frankly, there's a lot of change. And so, we need, what we really need is a renewed sense of clarity and a renewed sense of passion around the mission that God has called us to.

And there are a few things I think we can learn from this passage that speak specifically to that. Number one, when we look at how Nehemiah responds, we see that the first thing he does, the first thing we see Nehemiah doing is that Nehemiah simply listens, right? As we think about how do we seek God's vision, how do we seek clarity over what we're called to be in this next chapter of our life together? The first thing that we see Nehemiah doing is listening. A lot of well-meaning Christians make the mistake of rushing in to help, assuming they already know what the needs are, and assuming that whatever the need is, that they are the answer. And that can sometimes do good, but it can a lot of times lead to more harm than good. And so, as we begin to develop a vision for ministry, not only in Shaw, but in all the communities and neighborhoods where we live, a ministry that is possible because we have a permanent space, one of the first things we're going to do is we're going to do a lot of shutting up and a lot of listening. We're going to take a lot of time to listen and to learn. We're going to have opportunities to hear from other leaders in the community who are already doing great work. We're going to have opportunities to sit at the feet of some people who have been serving in some of these neighborhoods longer than some of us have been alive. And we're going to do a lot of listening and learning. We're going to be building relationships, more relationships with other churches and local leaders and seeing how we can be a part of the good things that are already happening. If we are called to be doing the work of building a city within a city, if we are called to bring light and life where there's darkness, that begins with awareness.

[23 : 03] That begins with being aware of the needs around us, the gaps and the holes and the places where people are needed. So, the first thing Nehemiah does is he listens. He listens to Hanani. Tell me the report. What's going well, what's not going well, right? The second thing we see Nehemiah doing is it's very simple. He listens and then he cares. Now, that should seem obvious, but he actually cares.

His mission flows out of a genuine compassion and a genuine empathy, a holy discontent, if you will. You know, that's a phrase that kind of refers to that sense of the burden that we feel over the brokenness that we see in the world. It's that burden that comes from not sitting separately from it, not seeing yourself as being somehow other or disconnected, but being a part of the world that you live in.

And the brokenness that this person or this community might be experiencing, there's a solidarity there where you feel the burden of that brokenness. That's what we see in Nehemiah, this holy discontent over the brokenness that he sees. And the point here for us is really that Nehemiah is willing to be emotionally engaged. He could have responded to Hanani's report very differently. He could have said, man, that's too bad, but hey, that's a whole lot right now. I don't really have time for this.

I've got a lot on my plate right now. I've got this government job. I've got a lot going on. So, go talk to somebody else about it. But he doesn't do that. And, you know, I was reading this and I was thinking a lot of us do. We work crazy hours. A lot of us have young children.

Some of us work crazy hours and we have young children, right? And most of us, I think, there's a lot of people in our church who are in a kind of age and stage of life where we sort of say, I really don't have any bandwidth for anything beyond just making sure that we are getting the homework done and that our kids are going to practice and that they're going to school on time.

[25 : 05] We're just trying to tread water, right? We're still trying to figure out bedtime because we're only getting three hours of sleep a night. You know, we're just trying to keep our heads above water. And there's a lot of legitimacy to that, right? I mean, life, especially in this area, can feel very overwhelming. It can feel very frenetic. And you throw a couple of kids in the mix and you just feel like I can barely, I'm barely holding on. But the point is, if God has called you to be a part of the church, whether it's this church or another gospel-centered church, chances are it's because God is calling you to be part of something bigger that He's doing in the city. And the thing that we have to come back to again and again and again, and especially now that we're on the cusp of moving into a permanent space, the thing that we have to come back to again and again and again is the church does not only exist to meet the needs of its members. The church may be one of the only institutions out there that exists to meet the needs of the people outside its walls, the people who are not members, the people who don't show up on Sunday, the people who may not even know we exist.

The church is one of the only institutions that exists for their sake, right? Being a city within the city means that the whole city should be better because churches like ours are here. Now, that sounds very presumptuous. But if we are truly called to live into the calling that we see here in this text, then the city should be better. I'm haunted by this question that we ask here and there. If our church were to disappear tomorrow, would anybody miss us? Would anybody notice? Would anybody care?

Would there be any needs that aren't met, any gaps that aren't filled because all of a sudden we cease to exist? I mean, being a city within the city means that the whole city should be better because we're here. Neighborhoods should become more vibrant and communal. Wherever Christians live, those neighborhoods, people should say, you know, I don't know what it is about that block, but they all know each other. And they have this great block party every year. And then this person hosts a Christmas party. And then this person...and it's...what a...neighbors in D.C. don't normally act that way.

Neighbors don't normally want to have anything to do with each other. But they all seem to like each other, right? Rates of loneliness should go down because there should be a community where it doesn't matter if you're not good at fitting in or you're socially awkward or you're highly introverted or you, you know, or you have a hard time trusting people or...it doesn't matter because there's this community where even a person like you is going to be welcomed in because people are just committed to loving you. Workplaces should become more humane because there are people who are in positions of influence within their organizations and they're able to set the policy and they're able to figure out how they should be treating employees and not taking advantage of them. And in a...in a culture where most people are just expected to work through the weekend and never take a day off, you've got Christians in places where they're saying, well, these employees are not going to do that. We're not going to...we're not going to cannibalize their parents to make sure...or their families to make sure that we can hit our bottom lines. You know, this should be a place where...where...where politics...so, you know, wow, those people, the way they talk about this upcoming election in November, it's just different. Like, they have lots of different opinions and they disagree on the policy, but they also seem to really love each other and they want to understand each other and they're willing to try to work across differences. It's not just a polite ceasefire.

We're not going to talk about it so we can get along. It's a, let's talk about it because I really care about your perspective and I might have something to learn from you kind of approach, right? The way we can get...racial healing should be accelerated because there are people that are actually going out of their way to try to build relationships, right, across racial and socioeconomic lines. And there are people who care about that and they're prioritizing that, not just on Sunday or as part of a program, but as part of the way they spend their off time, right? Their friend group reflects that commitment. Their close friend group reflects that commitment, right? The city should be better because there is a city within the city. Now, this doesn't mean we have to solve every problem. It doesn't mean we have to take on every issue. This is why it's great that there is a...the city needs lots and lots and lots of churches, different kinds of churches with different strengths and weaknesses. And only Christ can handle all the brokenness of the world. But there are certain areas certain areas of brokenness where God may very well be calling you, where God very well may be calling us to step in. So, we see Nehemiah hearing about the brokenness because he's listening. And once he becomes aware of what's happening, he cares. He emotionally engages. He doesn't stand apart from it.

[29 : 45] He says, you know, he's crying out to God, what do you want to do through me here? And then thirdly, Nehemiah prays. He knows that apart from God, all of our efforts are in vain. And so, the first thing he does after learning about the state of the city is to fast and pray. And what we see in this is Nehemiah not just falling into despair, oh, the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

He turns his grief into prayerful action, right? This year, prayer is going to be a major focus.

It's always a major focus in the life of our church, but this year, it's especially going to be so. Because we are devoted, as I look to the future of Advent, I see us being a community marked by prayerful action. Marked by, if you've ever heard the phrase, contemplative activism. People who understand the rhythm between retreating and hearing from our heavenly Father and being renewed and restored and filled up, learning how to rest, and then going out and engaging the world, right? And this rhythm is essential. This rhythm is essential. And so, what does it mean as an Anglican community in the heart of D.C. to be a center of contemplative activism, right? I was struck, I said this yesterday at our youth training, youth and ministry leader training, which was wonderful, by the way. You know, that Dallas Willard famously, there was a question put out, when you think of Jesus, what's the, what, if you could only describe Jesus in one word, what would it be? And, you know, we probably all can think of different things. Dallas Willard, famous, just many of us would say great hero, says, relaxed. Relaxed. And you think about all the things that Jesus did, and He was turning over tables in the temple, relaxed. Everything He did was intentional, purposeful, directly connected to the mission that His Father had given Him. And He was acting out of a place of rest, resting in His Father, resting in the love of His Father, resting in the clarity of the purposes that His Father had given to Him. Rest, right? And I just wonder, what would it be like to be a community that is, we are activists, we are out, we are engaged in the local politics, we're engaged, we're partnering with other local organizations, we're building, we're working and strategizing to solve real world on the ground problems in this city, but we're doing it not with that frenetic pace where it all depends on us, we're doing it from a posture of contemplation and peace.

We know what the Sabbath is, and we actually keep it, right? What would that look like for us to be that kind of community? So there's going to be numerous opportunities for prayer and worship. We're going to have a prayer team that's going to be reaching out to people, members and regular attenders, throughout the fall, telling you ways that we want you to be praying and also asking how we could be praying for you. We're going to be doing prayer walks in the Shaw neighborhood, opportunities just to walk and pray. Our middle and high school youth group is going to be spending all fall learning different ways to pray. So in all these ways, it's going to be an emphasis.

So in all the things that I've just said, like Nehemiah, over the next year, even as we do the work of physical renovation in our future home, we are also going to be doing the work of spiritual renovation in ourselves as we seek to be the city of God within the city of man. Let's pray.

[33 : 20] Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that we can turn to stories that are so old, and yet in many ways that are surprising, parallel our own. And that's only possible because it's all the same story. It's only possible because we are simply being enfolded as one chapter in your story that you've been writing that started at the beginning of time that will go into eternity.

Lord, help us to understand our place in your story. And Lord, give us the resources that we need to live it out. And as we undergo this physical renovation and as we undergo the spiritual renovation, we pray that the end result of both would be the same, that your name is held above all other names, that this city is no longer known as a center of human power and influence, but as a place where Jesus is King. And we pray in your name, King Jesus. Amen.