

“When in Straits”

Sermon for 23 June 2019

Texts: Genesis 11:10-32; Nehemiah 6:1-14; I Kings 19:1-18

6 Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), 2 Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” *But they intended to do me harm.* 3 And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” 4 And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. 5 In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand.

6 In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem[a] also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. 7 And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.”

8 Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” 9 For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, strengthen my hands.

10 Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said,

“Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.”

11 But I said, “Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?[seek sanctuary as if guilty of a crime? to seek refuge from his accusers] I will not go in.”

12 And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. 14 Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

In this episode from the rebuilding campaign of Nehemiah, there is a wall. There are some who are for the wall, and some who are against it. The infrastructure of Jerusalem was in a sad state. The gates were broken down and destroyed by fire. The wall went up in stages—when it was about half way up and joined together, the enemies of the Jews heard of it and **it angered them.** (Neh. 4:6-7) No wall, no city. The enemies preferred the open and defenseless position of the Jews living in Jerusalem—easy to rob, plunder, bully, abuse, intimidate and exploit. So they plotted to attack the city and stop the work. *Those preoccupied with defending their lives will be distracted construction workers!* The Jews in the countryside came and urged the workers to abandon the project! And the drumbeat of opposition grew louder and louder. So Nehemiah stationed armed guards, the attack was called off. The work resumed. Indeed, the citizenry was armed and men with trumpets were dispatched to sound the alarm should any assault be made—others could respond and reinforce the position.

To make the situation more dire, food was in short supply. The people had to mortgage their fields, vineyard and houses to obtain grain. The poor, among them, were sorely oppressed. The social fabric was in as great disrepair as the city wall. Nehemiah took action:

I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. ‘You are exacting interest each from his brother. . . .We, as far as we are able, have bought back our brothers who were sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us. They were silent and could not find a word to say. (5:7-8) . . . Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards and their houses and the percentage of money, grain, wine and oil that you have been exacting from them.”

It would appear that social equity was **as much in** shambles as were the city’s walls and gates! Jerusalem was in a dreadfully backslidden state—just as New England and Maine are at this time¹. Social and spiritual ruin would be compatible with broken infrastructure—was then and is now.

This is a perennial concern for people in society. Good government passes laws to make adjustments and to rein in those abusing their positions for personal gain. This is guided self-correction *and is vital to health and continued prosperity.*

When the dykes broke in Louisiana, it wasn’t the dykes fault. Political corruption and diversion of funds, motivated by graft and greed (of politicians, interest groups and lobbyists), prevented necessary maintenance. As I recall the blame was aimed at the federal level, the president, but the problem was locally grown! Jerusalem needed an entire make-over—these ruined walls were symptomatic. Equity had to be restored. Nehemiah undertook to do just that. A historical note: this inequity was very like that which precipitated the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile several generations back. “When will we ever learn?” as the song goes, “When will we ever learn?” *Society,*

¹ This spiritually hardened state/region requires a super-abundance of Spiritual power to overcome. New England isn’t just hardened ground; it is spiritually hostile territory. Warn the new pastors! Then pray for them more and more.

economic systems, it appears need periodic “justification.” Just so the state government goes about recalibrating scales, gas pumps etc, to insure that a gallon of gas is a gallon of gas everywhere in Maine! That no one is getting shorted: feed stores and foodstuffs are likewise regulated—especially if they cross state lines. Why? Well, because things get out of whack—sometimes over time, other times because the unscrupulous put their hands on the scales so as to defraud the buyer/customer. Greed for gain fuels the degradation of social order, both socially and economically. Decent and reasonable people expect regulation and welcome correction. Here a definition of:

eq-ui-ty /'ekwədē/

noun

1.

the quality of being **fair and impartial**.

"equity of treatment"

synonyms: fairness, fair-mindedness, **justness, justice**, equitableness, fair play; impartiality, even-handedness, lack of discrimination/bias/prejudice/bigotry, egalitarianism; honesty, integrity, rightness, rightfulness, rectitude, uprightness, **righteousness**, properness, **decency, goodness**, honorableness, scrupulousness, conscientiousness; reasonableness, sensibleness; disinterest, disinterestedness, neutrality, objectivity, balance, open-mindedness

Before we venture a word further, I want to point out the “religious” words listed under equity’s synonyms: **fair and impartial, justness, justice, righteousness, decency** and **goodness**. Equity is often confused these days with equality—they are not the same although they overlap in terms of **impartiality** and **justice** (!):

e-qual-i-ty /ə'kwälədē/

noun

1. Equality

the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities.

"an organization aiming to promote racial equality"

synonyms: fairness, justness, equitability, impartiality, even-handedness, egalitarianism, equal rights, equal opportunities, nondiscrimination; justice, freedom, emancipation; rare coequality

"the union's efforts to promote equality for women"

2. Social Equality

Social equality is a state of affairs in which all people within a specific society or isolated group have the same status in certain respects, including civil rights, freedom of speech, property rights and equal access to certain social goods and services. The freedom of religion is conspicuously left out!

Nehemiah addressed equity in Jerusalem as God would have us all do in America. It is possible, even necessary, to have equity even where equality is not fully pertinent. Liberty and freedom should be maximized for all, but not absolutized for any. This is for the common good—a focus that dissipates in the face of radical demands for freedom from all regulation, all restraint. He challenged the nobles and officials, the leadership elite, to reform their ways. Remember?

We, as far as we are able, have bought back our brothers who were sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us.

Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” (5:10-12) And they chose to do as they had sworn to do!

Now they did this voluntarily—out of **decency** and an awakened sense of justice and **brotherhood**². It sounds miraculous! It is a demonstration of the power of God to change the hearts and minds of mankind.

All his time as governor, **Nehemiah had modeled generosity**—he did not use/consume the governor’s allowance! Everything was at his own expense, on his bill. Surely this fine example strengthened his hand in governance. It encouraged others to generosity. Prosperity began to return to Jerusalem, peace and popular confidence. This, of course, infuriated, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem (and the rest of our enemies!). So they entered into a conspiracy to take out Nehemiah.

- They set up a meeting with the intent to assassinate him.
- They sent to him four times. To which Nehemiah replied, **“I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should I leave it and come down to you?”** (v. 3)
- Sanballat then authored a fifth attempt, a fake dossier: **“It is reported among the nations, and Geshem[a] also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. 7 And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will**

² Two passages come to mind here: Romans 8:5-14 and 1 Cor. 6:1-11. The first confronts those who **live according to the flesh** and contrasts them with those **live according to the Spirit**. *It is a matter of death versus life*. Death, dissolution and ruin are companions for those who remain **hostile to God**. Paul cogently argues that they **who are no longer in the flesh** but rather **have the Spirit of Christ**, meaning, **Christ living in them** will live righteously—which is precisely what Nehemiah is urging the **nobles and officials** to restore balance, clear the books, return property and means to those who suffered deficiency. They did so out of a sense of justice, decency and brotherhood—a drive for equity planted by God within them. 1 Cor, 6:1-11 sustains this brotherhood concern. Brothers should not file lawsuits against each other—grievances should be dealt with in house! No one is better qualified morally and spiritually to judge than a fellow Christian. As Christians we are to judge the world, and in the next life to judge even the angels—are we not significantly more qualified to deal with things here on earth? What can the worldly, the unchurched know about these matters? They arise out of acknowledgement of God, the love of Christ and his righteousness. How righteous can they be? How just? Good and decent? **If you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church?** (v.4) Is no saint wise enough to be a righteous judge? [I know half a dozen such men personally!] Are there no reconcilers, no mediators, no peacemakers amongst us? **Then how is Christlikeness even named amongst us?!** What about gentle, loving, merciful and truthful? In a culture where lawsuits have become a way of life—to take anyone to court is a significant spiritual defeat. See how these Christians sue each other doesn’t have the same ring as *love each other*. Stop defrauding our brothers. **Why not rather suffer wrong? You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.** (v.11) So let’s get on with the equity.

hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.”

According to this report, Nehemiah was usurping authority and committing treason!

- Here's Nehemiah's reply: **“No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.”** No one used opposition research in those days, but Sanballat had mastered the art form! They were trying to take down the duly appointed governor of Jerusalem so as to maintain their power, control and oppression of the people!

This is nothing but sheer power politics. However, they weren't done—now they tried to sully the reputation of Nehemiah, and sought make him out to be a coward. **THESE WERE THE STRAITS THAT NEHEMIAH WAS IN.** Would he run for it like Elijah? Would he seek sanctuary in the temple (which would have become his prison, or place of house arrest) *as if he were guilty of wrongdoing—such as they suggested.* It was a trap. The Parkland, Florida Deputy Sheriff “ran” when he took cover rather than enter the school and engage the shooter. He went home to his home and family that night—unlike the victims of the shooting. He has been charged with cowardice (Is that a crime?). He was certainly guilty of *dereliction of duty* when he chose to protect himself above the protection of defenseless students and teachers. He might have died a hero but chose to live a coward. Terribly sad, really. In the straits of his life, he was no Nehemiah! The county should perhaps choose better deputies—some willing to risk harm to save lives.

The prophet Shemaiah was a shill, a hireling of Tobiah and Sanballat as it turns out; he wasn't speaking from God at all. **And I understood and saw that God had not sent him.** (6:14) Nehemiah stood his ground. He did not run, or hide from danger.

But Elijah did.

1 Kings 19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” 3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

We have no reason to doubt Jezebel's intention to kill him. But Elijah forgot who controlled his destiny, who had appointed the time and place for him to die. And that would not be Jezebel. Note the emptiness of her threats, *the gods she invoked did not even exist.* So neither she nor Elijah were in any divine jeopardy. Jezebel was behind the Baal worship cult in Israel—she had brought that filth in with her when she married Ahab. The four hundred priests that Elijah had slain on Mt. Carmel, were on her retainer! She gave them royal sanction. **Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life.**

4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” 5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second

time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

God ministered to Elijah in his flight. He didn’t arrest and rebuke him. He even sent angels to minister to his physical needs (**bread and a jar of water**) and the angel reappears a second time: **Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.** (v.7)

There seems some form of divine endorsement on this flight plan because they Lord provided sufficiently for it: **8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.**

However, once Elijah arrived in the cave on the mountain, **the word of the Lord came to him . . . “What are you doing here, Elijah?”** This is not quite as simple as “Why are you afraid?” Or, “Why did you stop trusting in me?” Or, “Are you really more afraid of Jezebel, than you are of me?” Elijah states his reasons for failing to stand his ground.

10 He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” 11 And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.”

And I, even I only, am left. Fear made Elijah susceptible to a lie. He was not alone. He had never been alone because God was with him and besides we learn elsewhere that the steward in Ahab’s household had sustained some priests of Yahweh and God, being in charge, informs Elijah, after detailing his final duties, **Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.** (v.18)

What are you doing here, Elijah? Allowing that haunting question to be asked of ourselves is an excellent spiritual exercise. Why are you where you are? Are you in the midst of building a wall? Restoring justice to a broken society? Are you standing tall, or running for your life from some groundless threat? If you were able to make Elijah’s argument, what would be missing from your life . . . apart from trust in God? Are you famished for bread and water? Weak? Frightened? Of what and why? What does God do with his servant? He says, **Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord** (v.11)—I have something you are going to have to see to believe.

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord. (v.11b)

A rock splintering wind? A wind so powerful as to break rocks in pieces?! A wind separate from the earthquake which followed and both wind and earthquake separate from the fire. All the agents of divine judgment on full display before an astonished, awed prophet. **What was the threat of Jezebel compared with all this?!** Elijah stood on the brink of extinction and saw the power able to end him entirely on full display!

Now, according to the Greeks, reporting from the Babylonians, the Tower of Babel was destroyed by a wind of this character, of like force. . . with bricks flying like snowflakes

caught up in a blizzard of demolition. Debris and ruin everywhere. Just as archeologists discovered many centuries later. Other ancient inscriptions attribute the Tower's destruction to heavenly fire which split the Tower through the middle all the way to the core and it imploded. And, you've probably guessed, others cite a great earthquake. It could have been one, or a combination of two or more; however, I favor the wind of 1 Kings 19:11. Human pride, human passion, human presumption were judged and brought to ruin by divine power, according to divine purpose and accompanied by divine provision. Imagination can hardly frame what it was that Elijah witnessed on his way **to the still, small voice** which whispered then, as it whispers yet, **What are you doing here, my friend?**

15 And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17 And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Stop running, my friend, I have more work for you to do: you will anoint kings. **You will anoint your successor, Elisha**, and know that *I will bring a reckoning to Israel for their faithlessness*. Make sure you are not numbered among them. Run toward the future, not away from the past. Do what I command you and you will do well.

That leaves Genesis 11:10-32 with its introduction to the Abraham cycle in which courage features highly. These two portraits of courage (Nehemiah and Elijah) are preliminary to our study of Abraham, who curiously both ran and stood his ground alternatively—as we shall see. He **believed God**. It is really very simple. We all experience straits in this life what we do with them is critical to consider.

Do you believe God? What do you believe him for? That will determine, in part, the straits you may find yourself in and then you will have to choose: stand or run. What will it be.

We are in the straits, what will we do? Will we quit ourselves as escape artist, or as rescue workers, as victims of increasing violence or as defenders of the public peace? Will we run from death, or will we charge the enemy full bore? If you truly want victory, you must head for where the battle's most intense.

Amen.