

**Laboring with all our Heart
(Nehemiah 4:1-15)**

**Immanuel Presbyterian Church
Sunday 6, 2015**

Last Sunday's service focused on (Neh. 4:1-15) with particular attention to verse 6; "...so we rebuilt the wall...for the people worked with all their heart." Here is the text of my first sermon in this very loving and very welcoming congregation:

In this Labor Day, I have not found better story to share than that lived by Nehemiah a governor of Judea for two terms, starting around 445-433 B.C. The incidents recorded in Nehemiah 1-12 covers his first term and the second term recorded in Neh. 13. Nehemiah' in Hebrew means "Comforted of Yahweh."

Before becoming a governor, Nehemiah was a cupbearer for the King of Persia, (Neh. 1:12) In addition to tasting the wine to make sure that there was no poison in it, he was also a personal advisor to the king. **It was God who raised up Nehemiah to exercise one of the most trusted roles in the empire, the King's cupbearer and confidant.**

Nehemiah was one of three great leaders who lead the people of Israel from the Exile. The return of the People of God from Exile was done on three stages. The first was lead by Zerubbabel and Joshua see (Ezra 1-6) who also helped rebuilt the temple.

The second wave of return was lead by Ezra see (Ezra 7-10) in the year 458 B.C. Nehemiah lead the third return to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem around 445 B.C.

Rebuilding the walls of conquered cities posed a obvious threat to the Persian central administration. Only a close confidant of the king himself could be trusted for such an operation. Much like Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, Nehemiah had attained a significant role in the palace which then ruled the ancient world, a position from which God could use him to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in spite of its implications for Persian control of that city.

The story starts with Nehemiah, while working in the King's palace, receiving a report from his family that the walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt (Neh. 1:2-3). The conditions in Judea were terrible and hopeless. The people of God lived in affliction and shame. After four months of prayer and fasting, Nehemiah asked and received permission from the Persian king to go to Jerusalem to serve as its governor and rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah had a very simple strategy. Every household take a part in the building of the wall. Each house builds the part of the wall that faces the house. It is a very simple and yet very innovative strategy. It is cost effective. Everybody felt being part of the process, everybody can claim the wall as his/her and that is probably why "all worked from their heart," as landlords or owner of the Wall. Because of Nehemiah organizational and administrative skills, the walls were rebuilt and connected together in fifty-two days in spite of great opposition from the enemies of Judah. "As governor of Judah Nehemiah, exhibited humility, integrity, patriotism, energy, piety, and unselfishness," writes C. C. Ryrie.

12 years later, Nehemiah returned briefly to the King's court, see, (Neh. 13:6) and then back to Judah, where he instituted great revival and reform, see (Neh. 8:1-13:31).

Ezra who wrote Ezra 1 (according the Hebrew Bible) and Nehemiah (called Ezra 2 in the Hebrew Bible) were contemporaries working together, one as a priest and the other as governor. Ezra helped to bring spiritual revival, and Nehemiah worked to build the city and bring about political, moral, and social reform. This is a great leadership observation to take. Teamwork involves everyone and complement all. God was at work in that team, and God is and will be with us as we work together in Immanuel and as we journey together in this “new beginning” for our church and community.

What does this mean to us at Immanuel in this Labor Day?

First, having heart in all what we do:

“So we rebuilt the wall...for the people worked with all their heart” (this is the accurate translation of the Hebrew word heart mentioned here.

Heart is mentioned in three different ways in the Scriptures. First, as the center of emotion. In (1 Samuel 2:1), an example to that, was Hannah who after having Samuel said “My heart rejoices in the Lord, in the Lord my horn is lifted high). Here the heart is referred to as the center of our emotions whether joy or sadness.

In Luke 2:19 we find the second function of the heart as the center for reason and pondering, Luke commended about Mary after the Shepherds visit to Jesus by saying “ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

In Daniel 1:8 we read this “But Daniel resolved in his heart not to defile himself with the royal food and wine...” Here, the

heart is mentioned as the center of decision making, a center for resolve and determination.

The amazing thing is that when the word heart is mentioned in Nehemiah 4:6 it meant all of the above three. The best English translation to that Hebrew word “heart” was captured by the New International Version of the Bible that put it in a the phrase “with all their heart.” People were not just excited about building the wall, they counted the cost and they were ready to pay the cost, they were determined, resolved and committed to finish the task and hang with Nehemiah to the end, not with part of their heart but “with all their heart.”

Second: Understanding The Ups and Downs of Ministry:

Building is not an easy task. We have a saying that says “What we build in years can be destroyed in seconds.” It is easy to destroy, but very difficult to build. In building this wall, there were advances and set backs, there were at least four times of each. We read about the setbacks in (Neh. 4:1-3, 4:7-8, 4:10-12 and 5:1-6) in addition to two attempted setbacks in (Neh. 6:1-14, and 6:17-19). Thanks be to God, these setbacks were met by great advances. We read about these advances in (Neh. 4:4-6, 4:9, 4:13-23, 5:7-19) and final advance was mentioned in (Neh 6:15-16). As we journey together in this venture for Christ, and like those laborers of the old, we will have our ups and downs, we will try, fail, and try again. Yes, we will work with all our heart and we are determined to succeed or die while trying.

Third, Facing the Oppositions; Mockery, Sarcastic and Intimidation, (Neh. 7-8, and 11) in togetherness and with eyes above

As we journey together, there will be opposition, from within and from without. Yes, there will be difficulties, but there will be heart work, tears and sweat, and like Nehemiah, there will be joy, laughter and triumph, just like the one who went to plant in the early morning, going to plant in tears, but coming back with joy carrying the harvest and the sheaves.

Just as God protected the laborers on their journey and protected them from hostile forces in the land of Judah, God will protect God's people in this church. The LORD God is faithful to God's people even when they are faithless. One can see grace written all over the book of Nehemiah. As recorded by Nehemiah Judah's enemies started rumors that God's people had revolted against Persia to intimidate Judah into preventing reconstruction of the walls. In spite of opposition from without and heartbreaking corruption and dissension from within, Judah completed the walls of Jerusalem in only 52 days (Neh. 6:15), experienced revival after the reading of the law by Ezra (8:1ff.), and celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (8:14ff.)

We will work together and we will plant together, we will sweat and tears together and we will laugh, rejoice and praise the Lord together.

Fourth, Praising the Lord:

As Presbyterians, we follow one of the greatest reformers, John Calvin, who more than anything else emphasized the Sovereignty of God. In this great story of construction by Nehemiah, God demonstrates God's sovereignty in the affairs of God's people and the Persian emperors. A sovereign God who used a pagan empire to chastise God's people also used one to restore God's people to the land God had given

them. God used the opposition of Judah's enemies to drive God's people to their knees in the same way that God used the favor of Cyrus to return God's people to the Land, to fund their building project, and to even protect the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls. Nehemiah's enemies failed, not so much as a result of the success of Nehemiah's strategies, but because "God had brought their plot to nothing" (Neh. 4:15), "my God put it into my heart" (7:5). It was God who orchestrated the reconstruction of the walls in spite of much opposition and many setbacks; the "good hand of God" theme carries through the book of Nehemiah (1:10; 2:8, 18).

My friends in Immanuel, it is important for us to believe, as we start this "new beginning" together, that it is not us who are going to rebuild or transform Immanuel, It is Immanuel (which means God is with us) who is going to transform us and utilizing "empty vessels" like ourselves in accomplishing what God is starting. God is "putting in our heart" today a vision and a mission of new beginning, a vision of church growth and we, God' servants shall rise and rebuild. Amen?