

Sermon Series on Sidekicks of the Bible

*Sidekicks of the Bible 6: Ezra and Nehemiah, There's No Place like Home*

Nehemiah 2:1-6, 8:1-18

17 August 2008

When I had the idea for this series, I just planned to explore some of the lesser-known personalities of the Bible. I had not realized, in fact had no idea, how certain themes would recur and develop over the course of the series. Take Ezra and Nehemiah. I picked them because who in the world knows anything about them? Yet lo and behold it turns out that Ezra and Nehemiah echo the themes of Joshua. That's very convenient for my sermon! Yet it shouldn't have been such a surprise that everything would fold together so neatly. Rather it's a demonstration of how the Bible continues to build on itself, to retell old stories and reinterpret them in light of new situations. And that is a good practice for us moderns to continue.

So, back to Ezra and Nehemiah. My guess is that their names only ring a vague bell, if at all. These two books tell the story of how the Jews returned from exile to their homeland after everything had been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Ezra returned to rebuild the temple, and Nehemiah returned to rebuild the walls of the city, and important step for reestablishing its security.

Remember last week when we talked about how during the period of exile the Jews could have chosen isolation? But they did not. They chose integration, immersing themselves into the culture, even into the government itself, all the while holding on to their Jewish heritage. In this story we see the fruits of that approach. Ezra and Nehemiah both held positions within the Persian government, so that when the right time came, they were positioned to act in behalf of their people. Nehemiah, for example, was cupbearer to the king. This is no butler, but a close advisor and intimate of the king. So the story begins with Nehemiah hearing a report of how badly things have been going in Jerusalem back home, how the walls are falling apart, leaving the city vulnerable to danger. As with Esther and Daniel before him, Nehemiah is well-loved by the king, so that the king notices his distress. (Read Ch. 2:1-6)

So Nehemiah, like Ezra before him, goes back home. But it is not the thriving kingdom he knew in legend. The brightest and best had been carried off to exile, decimating the upper and middle classes. Furthermore, exiles from other parts of the empire had been transplanted into Jerusalem, and these foreigners had intermarried with the Jews who had been left behind. These marriages become a major source of concern, with Ezra demanding that the Jewish men divorce their foreign wives and abandon their mixed children.

The problem isn't intermarriage *per se*. It's how this mixing eroded the Jews' sense of identity and faith. Of course, racists ever since have used stories such as this one to justify anti-miscegenation laws, and it's hard for us to hear these stories today and not cringe at something that sounds a lot like racism to us. And indeed even within the Bible itself, some people thought Ezra went too far. Nehemiah did not urge divorce. He just asked the people to pledge not to inter-marry their children. And another Bible sidekick, Ruth, was written in part to counterbalance the books of Ezra by showing that the great David's own great-grandmother was a foreigner.

I didn't really want to get into this issue because it's so disturbing to us moderns, like the ban in Joshua. But as with the ban, I found that I can't tell the story of Ezra and Nehemiah without talking about this issue because it is a key issue in the book. But if we can put aside our discomfort, and if we recognize that the Bible itself is uncomfortable with it as well, then let us look at what this issue meant for its time. Israel as a nation was destroyed, the countryside and the society ravaged. All they had left was their identity as Jews. In some ways the exiles had an easier time of it. They had the challenge of having to figure out how to maintain their identity in a foreign land. But the Jews left behind had to contend with outsiders coming among them. Since they were still in the land of their ancestors, they took their identity as Jews for granted, which ironically left them vulnerable to cultural erosion. This is why it is that Germans in central Texas hold on to language and customs that have long since died out in Germany.

Now that the Jews are returning from exile, they have to deal with this erosion of their identity, and one way to do this was for the community to divorce their foreign spouses who had not converted, or to refuse to marry their children to them. It's difficult for us to hear, but the underlying issue is about the preservation of their identity. That wasn't the only issue. They also had to stop doing business on the Sabbath, and they had to start paying taxes to the temple again. Indeed,

it is not only the temple and the walls that need to be reconstructed. It's the people themselves. To that end, the most important work that Ezra and Nehemiah do is to reacquaint the people with the *torah*, with their own story and with the covenant God formed with their ancestors. (Read Chapter 8:1-18)

This is not Ezra imposing the *torah* on folks; the people called for this themselves. They built a platform for Ezra to read from so that everyone could hear him. And the congregation that gathered to hear him included women as well as men, and also all children who were old enough to understand. Not only was the book read to them, but there were teachers standing by, ready to instruct the people in what they were hearing.

And the people's response is to weep. To weep! Granted, sermons may be really boring, and we all probably have painful memories of trying to read the Bible, but this isn't the reaction you expect to hear about! Yet the weeping isn't due to a bad sermon or an incomprehensible Bible translation. There are many reasons why the people would have wept. Some of them may never have heard *torah* at all, and they wept to hear this important story that had previously been unknown to them. Some of them wept to learn of the covenant, to hear of God's steadfast faithfulness and to realize their own unfaithfulness. They were hearing, possibly for the first time, what it meant to be Jewish, and understanding how far they fell short in that identity.

Nehemiah, hearing their weeping, says to them: This is not a time to mourn. Today is a sacred day, so let's celebrate! The knowledge that they had fallen so far, so badly broken the covenant, was the first step in rebuilding their identity and restoring that covenant.

After they went home to celebrate the first day of the rest of their lives, they came back and heard about the holiday Sukkoth. This is a Jewish holiday that we Christians are not as familiar with as Hanukkah or Passover. It's kind of like camping in your backyard. Every family builds a temporary shelter called a booth. It's meant to be flimsy, with an incomplete roof so you can look up and see the stars. It may seem like a strange custom to us, but it was meant to recall those forty years in the wilderness between slavery and freedom when the Hebrews had no homeland, no temple, no city or walls. It was a time when the Hebrews relied wholly and completely on God, even for food and drink: manna from heaven and water from the rock.

So it was fitting for the returned exiles to observe this holiday. Without it, they might place the wrong emphasis on the temple and the walls they were rebuilding. They might think they had been freed by their own power, that they could rely on walls for protection and security, that the presence of a temple meant that they were religious, good Jews, saved.

The booths, then, serve as a reminder that even the strongest stone wall can be breached, that even those who sacrifice in the temple can break God's law. That's a temptation that we today face. As Christians, we have had security for so long. We are used to Christianity being the biggest nation in the world. We come to rely on our church buildings, as if they mean permanence. When I was starting Spirit of Peace Church, several new church pastors warned me to be in no haste to get a permanent building. That building, they said, would become a millstone around the church's neck. Not only would we then have to worry about utility bills and repairs, but we would come to depend on that building for our future rather than God.

Now I'll be the first to admit that there are times when a permanent building looks very appealing! Our own address! Our own space, built the way we want it built, expressing what we want it to express! No one wants to live in a booth forever. But on the other hand, it's true. Living in this "booth" makes us rely more completely on God.

Ezra and Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to rebuild permanent structures. But above all they came to rebuild the people themselves. Bricks and mortar can help in that task, but what it really takes is a solid foundation in the covenant with God. Stone may crumble and buildings may fall, but God's steadfast love endures forever.