

# MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY JANUARY 10, 2021

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **"Build That Wall"**

Based on Nehemiah 8:1-10

I know what you're thinking! It seems a bit naïve to not comment in some fashion about the events of this past week with our brothers and sisters to the south. While trying to tip-toe through the political minefield of the moment, I found it distressing to see what happens when the dark side of our personalities come to the fore. I have met a few people in my career who don't seem to have a negative bone in their body, but most of us have a dark side: moments when our cutting words are difficult to zip up before they get spoken, or days when we simply want to mope around the house and feel sorry for ourselves. But when those darker thoughts become more prevalent than the odd off day, they begin to take hold of us and reshape us in a way that is not healthy, and not helpful. And once you get there, it's really difficult to shake it off, and see the light again.

In a similar fashion, Nehemiah the Prophet, was trying to lead people who had truly found their 'grumpy place.' Now to be fair, life had thrown the people a whole series of curve balls they had

no control over. (Does this sound familiar?) They had been conquered by an invading army, dragged off into exile, and gradually allowed to return home to Jerusalem, only to discover their city in ruin, their fields destroyed and their future in tatters. Yipee! Yahoo! I'm home honey! <not so much>

Nehemiah got the brainwave that a 'Community Works Project' would help everyone focus on the future, work together for a common purpose, and rebuild their city to its previous glory. Different groups were put in charge of the different gates. It was a great leadership strategy. Give everyone the chance to be in charge, add their creative flair, and give them a sense of power and purpose and place, and Voila! You got yourself a rebuilt city and happy citizens ready to get on with their lives.

But as I said before, "Not so much." In the chapters leading up to our lesson today, there is nothing but trouble as each stone was set in place. "I wanted to build the Sheep Gate. Why does he get to build the Sheep Gate and I have to work on the Fish Gate? I'm allergic to seafood, so I don't

think I should work on the Fish Gate. If you think that I'm going to rebuild the Dung Gate than you're out of your mind. I ain't no garbage picker!"

And so it went.

One thing after another.

Ridicule and anger.

Discouragement and fear.

Internal strife and laziness.

Even the subtle suggestion of 'satanic compromise!'

Let's just say that Nehemiah was having a hard time getting the walls built, and getting the people to think with Godly vision.

I think I would have quit. I think I would have packed my books off my office shelf, found myself a new church and said, "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't need the aggravation."

But that's not what Nehemiah did. He gathered the people together. He assembled the other movers and shakers of the city so that they could be

seen. He stood on a platform so everyone could hear him. He pulled out his Bible (the Torah) and he began to read. Then the other leaders took over, and continued to speak with the people gathered. Finally, Nehemiah announced,

*“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord.*

*Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (v10)*

It changed everything.

It helped the people re-focus. It reminded them ‘why’ they were making the effort.

It reassured them that God had not forgotten them.

It has been said that if all else fails, pray.

Perhaps we should add, if all else fails, read The Word.

For many years, friends, the church has not really worked terribly hard at being strong. Because we were strong for so long, in numbers and finances and political influence. We were part of the fabric of society and moved in the ebb and flow of the life of the community. But as we all know, that strength has slowly withered away for one reason or another. Our influence and importance to the communities we serve and the people we serve, has often been set aside for other activities and priorities. We, the faithful remaining in the pews, know of the strength

that comes with The Word, but we are few in numbers, and our voice feels small.

Then came COVID. And a world that saw itself as invincible was knocked to its knees. The confidence of ‘having the world by the tail’ has been deflated like an overstretched balloon. And like the people of Nehemiah’s day, it has been easy for the darker side to take over, as the world drifts from one day to the next, unsure of its bearing anymore.

It would be easy for us to get caught up in such shadows and emotion.

It’s hard not to get lost in dismay when you are lockdown.

It is tempting to pack up your faith and turn your iPad off.

Or, You could read your Bible.

Because the joy of our Lord really is our strength.

The joy of the Lord really is what makes us able to stay strong in difficult times.

Sharing the joy of the Lord becomes our responsibility and privilege at a time when the world is willing to listen, because they have been so shaken by COVID.

The visibility and intentionality of our church in this city right now, shows a grumpy world that there is joy to be found, here, in this church, in our Bible.

Right now friends...

We have the luxury of being able to sit in our favourite chair these winter days, and contemplate God’s hand at work thousands of years ago in the lives of everyday men and women and children.

We have the opportunity to laugh with God, to cry with His people, to be angry at the unfairness that life sometimes brings, and be reminded of the steadfastness of our God in all times, and in all places.

We have the freedom, in this country, to read our Bible, in any language we want, publicly without fear of retaliation for doing so, and to be able to share our faith with others in confidence and safety.

Don’t waste these winter days.

For winter will soon pass and the business of spring will consume our quiet days.

The work of Christmas has begun.

And the work begins with your Bible.

Let’s get to work.

Let’s get reading.

Let’s reach for The Light.

Let’s build that wall!

Amen.