

“Making History” Nehemiah 1:1-3

“History had not treated the people of Israel well and they were again in sharp decline,” writes pastor and translator Eugene Peterson. This once powerful nation, of whom you and I know well, and who ruled, at times, over much of the Ancient World as the “The People of God,” were once again being taken over by yet another Superpower. You’ve heard the saying, “History has a way of repeating itself”? Well this is no truer than the story of our ancient Hebrew ancestors. The first time, they were forcibly taken from the Land promised to them by God to Egypt (the Exodus) and then a millennium or so later, dispersed, this time not to Egypt but Babylon. Babylon. Someone said have we can “blame everything on Babylon” because Babylon is where everything “ungodly” made its way into Israel’s “godly faith.” Idol worship? Blame Babylon. Breakdown of the family? Blame Babylon. New age theology? Blame Babylon. In fact, it’s hard to disagree when Babylon appears 280 times in our Bibles (from Genesis to Revelation) and never in a positive light. In fact Babylon even plays a prominent role in the end times narrative or when “all hell (literally) breaks lose,” in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. This deadly grip on Judaism and later Christianity was primarily because Babylon did what all victorious invaders did. To kill the loser’s spirit and eliminate any sign of the defeated nation that once inhabited the land, conquerors would kill many, put others to work, and the rest they would disperse throughout the land with the hope that the defeated would become like, and believe like their invaders and secondly destroy all remnants (the culture, the music, the religion) of the previous residents. Babylon mercilessly killed many, took even more (the brightest and the strongest) into captivity and left a very few behind while at the same time sacking the entire region in hopes of destroying not only the area but the entire history of the previous nation. In the case of Israel Solomon’s “Temple” or the place that identified Jewish identity and worship as well as the “wall” that surrounded the city and protected the city from attack, were the first two things Babylon set their eyes upon. Both Temple and Wall were utterly destroyed even before the last resident was forcibly removed from the only home and city they had ever known. Israel, for generations, would lie in ruins – that is until a remnant slowly made their way back. After persecution was no longer common and restrictions on travel lessened (primarily because Israel was no longer seen as a threat) the people of God returned to Jerusalem. But they had lived in Babylon for so long they were now “Babylonians”. They looked like them. Sounded like them. Even believed like them. But by the time Nehemiah wrote his memoir Jerusalem was again an inhabited by dispersed Hebrews - at least by name but not by practice - even that would soon change with the introduction of two men – the first being Nehemiah.

If you had difficulty finding the Book of Nehemiah in your Bible when I told you our Scripture lesson this morning, you're not alone. The book is unfamiliar to many and unread by even more but chances are good in your fumbling to find Nehemiah you happened upon Ezra, or the book just prior to Nehemiah – otherwise known as the “twin brother” to Nehemiah and the second important person. In fact, in the ancient Hebrew texts, the two were actually one book spanning 100 years or about 13 or so years apart from one another. Although two separate books today they really tell “one” story involving three movements and three personalities shortly after the diaspora. First there is the struggle to rebuild the Temple under Zerubbabel. I say, “rebuild” because Zerubbabel only began the build, when he led the first group of Exiles home but then took a 14 years break and only then did it resume. Then there was Ezra's expedition, some sixty years later to “enforce the Law of Moses” which is a harsh way of saying “re-teaching the story once again” to those Hebrews back in the homeland who had forgotten or never have been told the story before. The teaching of the ‘Law’ by Ezra is primarily the story in the Book of Ezra but Ezra also appears in the Book of Nehemiah. And last, but not least, we have Nehemiah who arrived in Jerusalem around 444 BC. We're told very little about Nehemiah in our passage this morning but told enough to feel like we can call him an acquaintance. We know from verse 1 for example, that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in the months of November/December (in our calendar) or “Chislev” (in the ancient calendar), and is the son Hachabiah. We also know he is from Susa which was primarily known as the winter residence of the Persian kings and is located 150 miles east of the Tigris River, about 250 miles west of Babylon or the edge of modern day Iran. That's what we learn from Nehemiah 1:1. If we read beyond our lesson we learn that back in Susa Nehemiah was a member of the royal court, a cupbearer by profession or one who tasted the wine to save the King's life just in case it was poisoned, to be exact. And even more important had a central part to play in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Ezra, unlike Nehemiah, was a priest and prophet. His own book tells his story returning to Jerusalem 14 years before Nehemiah, but not to rebuild the walls but rebuild a people, not with stones but words. The words Ezra spoke and taught was the Torah or the Law or the first five books in both the Hebrew Scriptures and our Christian Bible that was and still is central to the people of God. Although unrelated and having two very different “callings” they were deeply connected and in many ways shared one common story.

That story began with a simple question from Nehemiah. Apparently people had come to see Nehemiah in Susa and because it was the polite thing to do, or there was a lull in the conversation, or because of sincere interest on the part of Nehemiah, Nehemiah asked a question, a two-part question. The question is verse 2 and the response in verse 3. The question from

Nehemiah may seem rather innocent and even makes us wonder if he really wanted to know the answer like the questions, “Is it cancer?” “Is the marriage really over?” “You’re laying me off?” Yet Nehemiah asks anyway. He asks his “brother” and some un-named others, who have come to Susa from Jerusalem. Nehemiah asks for an update on what has happened to those who escaped captivity and the city of Jerusalem. The people and the captivity is, of course, is in relation to the Jews who were not taken away to foreign lands by the Babylonians or those who have made their way back “home” for one reason or another. Maybe Nehemiah asks about the “people” because those now living in Jerusalem are distant relatives and he cares about them. But he also ask about a city he may never have set foot in but still seems important to him. Although living in Susa, one of the most ancient cities and most prominent cities in all of Babylon, Nehemiah appears to have a special place in his heart for the city. Maybe its because Jerusalem was once a great and prominent city. Jerusalem was once the “kind” of city Susa now is. Once upon a time Jerusalem was the Holy City and the Royal City but now it is simply a city in ruins. King Solomon’s Temple that invited Jews throughout the Middle East to come and worship and non Jews to come admire and the wall that other nations modeled their own walls upon, had long since been destroyed. So when Nehemiah asks about Jerusalem and her people it should not surprise us of the answer given in verse 3. In response to Nehemiah’s question, hi guests answer, “The people are in trouble,” the “walls are broken down” and the “gates are now heaps of ash. That’s what we know so far, if we believe the story to be true. How can we be sure? I mean, Nehemiah is some distance away. He can’t see it for himself. And who are there people anyway? Can they be trusted? What will Nehemiah “base” what he thinks he should do on? Maybe Nehemiah thinks back to past history. Is what he was hearing about a broken city and a troubled people, a familiar narrative? Does it sound familiar to our modern ears?

If it does sound familiar maybe it is because “History has a way of repeating itself. Here at KesPres, we are members of a broken church or city and people in trouble. We have lived so long in the “secular world” we have forgotten the “sacred” or worse still, have separated the two, or as Eugene Peterson writes in is introduction to Nehemiah that we too have “irreparably damaged any attempt to live a whole and satisfying life, a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God”. Just one of the many things that Nehemiah “together with” Ezra teaches us is that a cupbearer turned builder and a Bible-teaching-priest turned missionary are both involved in ministry in the city they live. One is not more important than the other. One is not more “religious” than the other because both are needed to transform their city. We are a broken church full of troubled people who live in a broken city full of troubled people. Our city, like all cities is not once of

grace or mercy and love. People are living in troubled marriages, troubled financial problems, troubled futures. Our only hope, our church's only hope our city's only hope, ironically, is that "history has a way of repeating itself."

In the midst of an Exodus a man by the name of Moses arrived on the scene to remind people of a God who had not forgotten them even though they had forgotten God. They were living in bondage and longed to be free but didn't know. They had lived so long immersed in the culture of their day they thought change was simply impossible but God would come and free them. A millennium or so later, these same peoples found themselves living in a time when God seemed deathly quiet but Ezra reminded them God still had a voice revealed in God's written Word which helped show a way to live a life that is pleasing to God. And when the people felt God had abandoned them Nehemiah reminded them that God would surround them and build them up once more. But these peoples had lived so long immersed in the culture of their day they thought change was simply impossible but God would come and love them. And then 2500 hundred years later when things apparently couldn't get any worse, history once more repeated itself when God came to a broken city full of troubled people in human flesh to show the world how much he loved them – even giving up his life for them. They had lived so long immersed in the culture of their day they thought change was simply impossible but God would come and save them. And now 2000 years a broken church full of troubled people see their city for what it is: broken and it's people as who there were: troubled. The city has lived so long immersed in the culture of their day they thought change was simply impossible but God would come and reveal Himself to them through His church.

I don't think it's an accident that the word "history" is also "His story". All those stories I have shared from Egypt, Babylon, Palestine, and Keswick are "true" stories and in many ways one in the same story. If we base on our lives on His-story, if our church bases our communal lives on His-story, if we take His-story into our community we will make "His-story." Thanks be to God!