

Facing the Resistance

Nehemiah 4

When we left Nehemiah last week, it was so inspiring to hear how members of the community banded together, working shoulder to shoulder to reconstruct the battered and neglected walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem. People from all walks of life: from business owners and artisans to local government officials and women, to priests and homeowners, even people from other communities came to join the rebuilding efforts. It had to have been energizing, to look down along the wall, and see a team of workers, each individual lending a hand to get the work done. Chapter 3 definitely reads like a good news story.

But... why does it seem that there is always a but? But then, we continue the story with chapter 4. And right from the beginning, literally just two words into the chapter, all the progress and good will from chapter 3 seems to begin to deflate. Just when we thought a block party was about to break out, while the neighbours and community members are high fiving one another, back to reality. When Sanballat....that's how this chapter begins. When Sanballat hears that the wall is being rebuilt he becomes angry and greatly incensed. So he and his associate, Tobiah, both of whom we met in Chapter 2, begin chirping out their sneering and condescending commentary. Sanballat and Tobiah, you might remember are no friends of Israel. Each of them has a political stake in territories outside of Jerusalem and so efforts to rebuild and strengthen the city pose a threat to their own interests. In other words, Sanballat and Tobiah feel threatened by Nehemiah and by his leadership as he coordinates the rebuilding efforts. And human nature was really no different in those days than it is today. So, when Sanballat and Tobiah feel threatened by the camaraderie and the progress being made to rebuild the community, they begin doing what it is that they do best: undermining the work. The way that they react is one that is very familiar to us. As I read it here in chapter 4, I was struck by how kind of ridiculous this story seems. It seemed to me almost cartoonish, as if this story could have become a Veggie Tales movie or even something written by Dr. Seuss. What is this work now underway? Will the Jews come back to stay? Will they finish in a day? Will they build the walls from clay? It may sound a bit ridiculous to me because it started out as ridicule: "making fun of" though there really is nothing "fun" about it. It is meant to direct attention away from the one who feels vulnerable, weak, in an effort to prop themselves up. Let's just call it what it really is: bullying. Bullying is nothing new. It was alive and well in the days of Nehemiah. Sanballat and Tobiah feel threatened by the amazing show of teamwork along the wall. So, they use the tools that they have available to them to undermine that work; not physical tools but psychological tools. They hurl insults and plant seeds of doubt and discouragement. They are opposed to the progress that is being made likely not only on the rebuilding of the wall itself but also on the strengthening of the community because it threatens their own positions of power and standing in relationship to the community.

But the story doesn't end there. Nehemiah's immediate response was prayer. I love that prayer was his go to response. He didn't have to think about what to do next. He just prayed. But maybe not the kind of prayer that

you would expect to find recorded in the Bible. It's actually one of the things I love about the Bible. It's never airbrushes real life from its pages. No one has prettied this up so we all come out looking perfect. We are fallen. We say stupid things. We do the wrong thing. We mess up. We sin. We have hateful thoughts. This isn't a book about nice people always playing nice. How boring would that be? Maybe even more boring than reading through a list of names that you can't pronounce. Nehemiah's prayer is so honest. He actually prays that God will do to Sanballat and Tobiah exactly what had been done to Israel. It is a prayer that can be summed up in two phrases which I am borrowing from Mark Thronveit¹. Nehemiah prays: Lord, save us and get them. It is an absolutely realistic comeback directed at God rather than at the enemies. Don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying it was the right thing to pray: just because a behavior appears in the Bible does not mean it condones the behavior. Sometimes the Bible tells the story on itself so that we learn from it. We see how wrong and detestable a behavior is. But that is a picture of a genuine prayer when Nehemiah was feeling under attack, when we are feeling under attack. We want to strike back at the enemy. We want God to strike back at the enemy. It is a picture of our humanity. And once Nehemiah had expressed the anger and frustration he felt toward Sanballat and Tobiah, he got on with the work. Just like that. So the work continued and they kept going in the face of resistance. They didn't back down or give up or huddle up and talk it over. They worked. And they kept at it, working with all their hearts. What a great image; a community working together with all their hearts. And the progress is amazing.

But the resistance does not give up either. In fact, it is gaining strength. What begins with two angry bullies "making fun of" Nehemiah and the Jews, grows, a few snickers at first, hand over mouth giggling, turned to guffawing and laughing out loud, until they are snorting and howling and seething. Sanballat and Tobiah have found friends: misery loves company they say. And soon they are joined by the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod, all of them now very angry at the progress they have seen on the city walls and plotting to shift the attack from psychological to physical threats. And again, Nehemiah reacts with prayer. But anxiety grows among the people. And the people of Jerusalem, the people on the inside, begin to murmur – the workers are getting tired; the work is too great; they will never be able to do it. While the sound of discouragement is rising, so too is the resistance from Sanballat and friends who now threaten to kill the workers. It is a perfect storm. The workers, who have been working with all their hearts, are tired. The work is hard. Rather than encouraging them by telling them what a great job they are doing, their own people begin to cave. And as if that were not enough, now Sanballat, Tobiah and their companions are uttering death threats. But Nehemiah does not give way to fear. He doesn't say, "You're right. This is too hard. I'm tired. I'm afraid." He does not back down. In fact, he steps up. He stands up to the bullies and he makes it possible for the work to continue without delay. How? Nehemiah shifts the focus away from the threats and the rumors and the complaints back to God, back to God, who is great and awesome.

What was true in Nehemiah's time is also true in our own time. Not everyone likes to see God's work being done. Not everyone likes to see God's kingdom growing or darkness being pushed back by light. The work is

hard and not only that but we can become objects of taunting and bullying. We might be tempted to give up. We are probably going to get discouraged and tired and there will be anxieties and words of discouragement spoken from inside these walls. And it would be so, so much easier to give in and give up. Maybe working hard to restore our communities as God's own is not what you thought you signed up for. Maybe you thought that following Jesus would be nice and easy: sunshine and rainbows. But here's the truth: Jesus work place was not inside the church – it was out in the community, on the streets and pathways. Jesus never stopped inviting the outsiders in to his circle of friends, never stopped hitting the streets, reaching out his hand to touch the sick or broken, he never backed down to the challenges of the status quo. And they crucified him. And what does he say to us? Not, you're right, this is too hard for you. No, he says, take up your cross and follow me. It doesn't take enormous faith to do the work God asks us to do, to do the work of rebuilding this community. It takes faith in an enormous God who makes us able to do it, despite resistance, despite exhaustion, despite fear and anxiety. But when we have that faith in an enormous God, then the assertion written by the Apostle Paul can also be said of us. He wrote: "I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." God makes us able to face the resistance and keep going.

This is the table where His work was both completed and begun: His sacrifice for our sins was completed. His work of reestablishing the kingdom had begun. At this table he invites us to come, to take our rest, to be fed and nourished, and to be strengthened for the work he has called us to do. But we can't sit at the table forever. From this table he sends us out, not to the safety and comfort of our homes, but into our relationships, our neighborhoods, our troubled world. All who love Him are welcome here. Come and know his grace. Come and be filled for the work to which he has called you.

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ⁱ Mark A. Throntveit, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, Ezra-Nehemiah, p.81