

**OPENING:**

Another sermon today on Nehemiah, on our Old Testament lesson, and another Stewardship sermon, on this the 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend of our 2026 Campaign.

Every year, the Social Security Administration, that venerable cog in our Federal Bureaucracy, releases a list of the most popular baby names for that year.

In 2024, the name 'Nehemiah' was 426<sup>th</sup> among boy's names.

'Ezra,' meanwhile, the name of Nehemiah's companion book in the Bible, has vaulted up the rankings, all the way up to 13<sup>th</sup>!<sup>1</sup>

"Poor, poor Nehemiah." An odd choice to build a stewardship theme around.

I used to teach U.S. Government to high-schoolers and eventually, sometime in the Spring, we would get to the section on the Federal Bureaucracy.

Not the most exciting of units, but I would try to make it come alive.

I wish I could go back and teach about it now. I have a church full of bureaucrats—much despised and put down. But I know their quality and worth, their devotion to our common weal and the public good.

I would not (now) use terms like "bean counter" or "paper pusher" even in jest.

**NEHEMIAH**

It seems that bureaucrats have been dismissed and treated with scorn throughout the centuries.

Nehemiah, our Stewardship protagonist, was also... a bureaucrat.

And likewise, at first glance, up for criticism.

In Chapter One, we learned he is serving at a high level for the Persian King;

I am talking G-15 or above. He is a cupbearer, which would have been like the

'Chief of Staff' or maybe 'Undersecretary for External Affairs,' living in comfort in Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq, for the global power of the day, the Persians.

He has got it made, a cushy job, government clearance, cabinet-level rank, and on and on.

But, something is missing, something is broken, there is a deep wound inside of him. Last week, we heard about how Nehemiah learned about the ruins of Jerusalem and the Temple, about his home and his religious community...

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/>

Nehemiah mourns the situation there. He mourns for four months, it seems. Nehemiah prays, and he fasts. And then, today, an opportunity presents itself to him. His boss, the emperor, asks, “Why so sad, Nehemiah?”

And Nehemiah gathers his courage, and names the hurt. His calling, his vocation, his ministry, begin in that moment where he reveals *that for which his heart breaks*. Someone put it this way once:

“It isn’t until you know for whom or what your heart breaks that God can reveal where in the community and with whom your ministry needs to be done. This broken heartedness isn’t just the stuff of love songs; it is what lifelong missions are made of.”<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, Nehemiah had so much to lose in this moment.

Jerusalem was 1000 miles away and Jews like Nehemiah were doing quite well, actually, in exile.

So, in telling the truth to the King, he was putting his livelihood, his life in King Artaxerxes’ hands.

It was a hard decision, “it took him a lifetime and four months to get there.”<sup>3</sup>

But that day in the King’s court, he looked around and said:

“My heart breaks for my brethren in the Holy City...

I want to do something about it.”

Next week he will travel to Jerusalem and declare for all to hear:

“(Now) let us rise up and build.”<sup>4</sup>

## STEWARDSHIP

There are parallels to be drawn between that historical moment in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in the Ancient Near East and our moment today in 2025 with St. Timothy’s in Herndon, VA.

It starts with, again, the rehabilitation of the bureaucrats.

Nehemiah was a bureaucrat and he came back to rebuild the walls.

It was hard, he not only had to get all the cubits and the bricks right, but he had to face folks who said, echoing church talk over the centuries: “That’s not how we do it around here...” AND “Why can’t we build back the way we had it before?”

Not to mention, more helpfully: “Why are you focusing on this building project? What about the *spiritual* lives of the people?”

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<sup>2</sup> Daniels, Joseph W. 2014. *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community Is Your Congregation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 2.18

Ironically, Ezra—the figure on the flip side of the coin, of these books in tandem—Ezra was a priest. And he got all the same complaints: “Things were better under the old rector. Who are *you* to tell us what to do? Can we go back to the old prayer book?” Even the age old: “why don’t kids behave better in church?”

I can imagine that my predecessor John Henry, six plus decades ago, faced similar challenges and complaints when he embarked on buying this land, and building this building.

One of the amazing things though was this:

If you recall your Stewardship letter, St. Tim’s parishioners met in the parish hall of the “Old Church”, June 1960, and voted in favor of purchasing the property here.

In that same Summer, the Reverend John Henry, our “Ezra,” was sick, having spent some time in the hospital. He was so sick that he had to write a pastoral letter to the congregation for more time-off, saying that, in August, he and his wife would be spending an extended amount of time on leave, at the Bishop’s House in Richmond. So the \$25,000 mortgage had been signed, the building plans were on the horizon.

And the priest was on the disabled list. Absent. Who would lead them/us?

The answer, of course is: “Nehemiah” would.

For St. Timothy’s, it was a host of bureaucrats who stepped in and measured the cubits and the bricks and sent the appeals, and raised the money.

It was not easy, in that moment, there was some red tape to be cut.

Under Virginia Law at the time, churches could not own more than 4 acres in a town jurisdiction. The land here was 10 acres.

These are the pickles that vestries from time immemorial have had to face, the type that scare away the type of folks who no doubt thought:

“Why can’t we just stay in this old, dilapidated church with inadequate parking? I know the kids have to be bussed to Sunday School at the Methodist Church but that’s okay. Herndon is growing but what if we just stay small here on Elden Street which is what we know and love.”

Luckily, our church leaders heard the same question that Nehemiah got asked:

“For whom does your heart break?”

And they answered thusly:

“Our hearts breaks for the Future of this Church, for what we feel like God is calling us to do, for what might be accomplished if we had a building that could serve our growing needs.”

We know what happened, the bureaucrats knifed through those complication with letters and Vestry meetings and, no doubt, some gnashing of teeth and searching of soul. They might have exclaimed upon completion, to echo the musical *Hamilton*: “We’re bureaucrats, we get the job done.”

Without this new building, imagine the future:

NO Pre-School, No AA Groups. Limited room for Sunday School.

Or imagine if we had bought out in unincorporated Fairfax, which was the cheaper option on the table. Inevitably, St. Timothy’s would have been okay, but different, losing that historical identity rooted in this place, and perhaps being just like a lot of Episcopal Churches out there in the suburbs, and probably no Spanish-Speaking service.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Now, of course, there are differences between us and 1960, not to mention between us and Nehemiah.

We are not building a new building, buying more land, constructing a bell tower.

We are not living in exile, we are not rebuilding the ruins of our culture. And, I am not sick, my wife and I do not want to spend a month at the Bishop’s house.

But the question remains:

“For what does your

/our/

my heart break?”

Like Nehemiah, what is the thing that you cannot stand, that you have to risk everything for? *That* is where you should put your Time, Talent, and Treasure.

If you answer with: “Charles, my heart breaks for the HVAC system in our church, specifically for Unit #1 TRANE Model, Serial # 21555 HUAD, installed in 1969, the middle unit on flat roof outside Upper Room” then you get a gold star!

But your answer is probably something else.

Your heart breaks for our brothers and sisters in Haiti,

your heart breaks for our Saturday night congregation to be able to worship in peace,

you pray for our music program

and for our growing Sunday School,

and maybe even for your rector to get an Associate.

Another word for this is “passion” which means suffer.

What is your passion?

Nehemiah found his passion when he searched inside of him for what broke his heart.

Nehemiah had been the Steward of this King, but he became so much more.

He transformed himself & the stiff-necked people that were his community, & he transformed the city of Jerusalem, its walls and lives of his people as well.

I invite you indeed to consider your stewardship prayerfully,

take your time with it,

pray about it,

don't take 4 months mind you, but take your time,

then make your passionate pledge for that which your heart breaks,

and then trust your Vestry, your Nehemiahs, and the staff

to hear that prayer and to offer it up to God as we rise and build again.

**AMEN**