

“Returning Home”
August 29, 2021

Nehemiah 3:1-3, 6, 11-12
Revelation 21:1-4, 15-21

The city of Jerusalem has long held a central place in the religious imagination of both Christians and the Jewish people.

It is the City of David, the great king. It is Zion, the mount of the Temple, the very house of God. It is the home of God’s covenant people.

When that ancient seer, John of Patmos, concluded his Revelation, he wrote of the restoration and renewal of all creation under the sovereignty of God. He saw a new heaven and a new earth, culminating in the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. The city itself was gold, surrounded by walls of precious jewels with gates of pearl. The gates themselves were never shut, for there was no longer any danger nor need of protection. It would be the home of God and the people.

The old *Pilgrim Hymnal* included the 16th century hymn that sang:

Jerusalem, my happy home,
When shall I with you be?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Your joys when shall I see?

This is the vision, the hope, that we have by faith.

It is not, of course, the way things are.

For 17 months we have known—often at personal levels—the pain and death, the mourning and crying caused by the pandemic. It currently surges across our nation in ways unanticipated by most people just three months ago.

From a distance, we watch as events unfold in Afghanistan—a disaster of pain and death, of mourning and crying.

What was said to be a racial “reckoning” last summer has yielded little fruit—pain and death, mourning and crying continue.

The changes that we have brought upon our earth—slowly and quickly—and the wildfires, storms, drought, and flood that such changes are themselves bringing carry with them pain and death, mourning and crying.

Over several weeks we have turned our sights toward the ancient city of Jerusalem and its restoration after the pain and death, the mourning and crying of the exile in Babylon. This morning and next Sunday we conclude our consideration of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These two books tell of return and restoration and renewal after the devastation of the Exile. We’ve been listening to their stories because in various ways they inform us as we cautiously move toward our own return and reopening and renewal. They speak to us as we live somewhere between the rebuilding of the ancient Jerusalem and the revealing of the new Jerusalem.

A few weeks ago, we heard the book of Ezra tell of the rebuilding of the Temple. This morning we listened as Nehemiah told of the repairing of the walls of the city.

As a result, I've been thinking about infrastructure—those physical things that, in both ancient and modern times, allow people to carry out their daily activities.

Now, we generally give little thought to infrastructure—unless it breaks down or needs funding. We don't think much about the roads we drive on until they develop potholes.

We don't think about watermain until a leak develops.

We didn't think about the electricity and the circuit breakers in this building until the power started going out.

Infrastructure is what gives us the support to do what we do.

Chapter three of Nehemiah tells of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. More specifically, it tells of the rebuilding of the *gates*—and there are a lot of them: the Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Old Gate, the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the Horse Gate, the East Gate, the Muster Gate—and yes, even the Water Gate.

Gates are as important as walls for a city. Walls, of course, provide protection—this was especially the case in ancient cities. Walls provide definition, making clear what's inside, what's outside, what is the city and what isn't.

But the gates allow all that happens inside and outside the city to happen. Gates allow people to come and go. Gates allow travel and homecoming. Gates allow commerce and trade. The Psalmists sang, “Lift up your gates” so that the worship of God might occur as the people joined in procession. As beautiful or as functional as gates were, they were important infrastructure.

Neither walls nor gates surround our city nor our building.

But we do have doors.

Since this building was completed in 1869 our doors have been open to all who pass by. And we keep changing them. Old photos show that at some point we found it necessary—and possible—to put an electric light above the door. At first the doors were at the top of a flight of stairs. Then we remodeled and brought the entrance down to the street level. We put a new façade on top of the original doors. And over twelve years ago we installed the stained-glass window above the doors.

Like the gates, as beautiful or functional as the doors might be, they are important infrastructure. It is essential for our ministry and mission that our doors open freely.

We actually replaced one of our doors during the pandemic—that utilitarian brown door off of the parking lot. It hasn't been used by many people for all these months, but it looks better and it works better.

Our doors are a sign of welcome. They open so that all may enter for worship, for study, for community, for inspiration. They open so that all may leave to live lives of faithfulness and service and leadership in the world outside our doors. Yes, for the past 17 months our doors have been locked most of the time. But that is slowly changing. They still open easily and we look forward to the days when we fling them open wide once more.

Of course, doors are not of much good if no one goes through them.

While Nehemiah goes into great detail about the gates and their repair, he also goes into great detail about those making the repairs. With each of the gates mentioned, the book of Nehemiah tells who was involved in the rebuilding. We heard names of some of those people in the reading this morning. Most of them are otherwise unknown, remembered only for the work they did some twenty-five hundred years ago.

Those names reveal one of the central features of scripture and our faith: people—men and women who were captive and set free, a few of whom enjoyed a great deal of power and fame but most of whom were unknown. They are important to us not for *who* they were but simply *that* they were.

Because it was a patriarchal society, most of the names we read belong to men. But we also heard this morning of a certain “Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem,” making repairs on the walls of the city. And, surprisingly, we are told that it was “he and his daughters” who did the work, although we don’t know their names.

In all those names that we encounter in Nehemiah—and in the rest of scripture—we find the real story.

Most of the time the people we read about in the Bible were simply trying to live their own lives in the difficult situations of their own times—much as we are.

They were concerned with work and families, with sickness and death, with the small pleasures of living—much as we are.

They weren’t seeking sainthood—and generally didn’t achieve it. They weren’t seeking greatness. And they were more often trying to avoid God than they were looking for God—again, much as we are.

And yet—as still happens—God found them.

They—and we—also found one another.

You know that once we started our online worship services, we’ve had Zoom Coffee Hour on Sunday starting around 11:00—we’ll have one again today and I invite you to join us. Two things have surfaced from these weekly events:

People would really like to see one another in person. We’ve all grown weary of the Zoom boxes that contain us. This was the joy of those who went to the picnic back in June when we thought the end of all of this was near. We took off our masks. We sat together. We ate together. And we looked one another in the eyes as talked together. This was also the joy of those who worshipped together in City Park two weeks ago, even as the reality of the Delta variant was sinking in. Our masks were on. We kept our distance. Still we stayed after worship to talk with one another.

All this might be expected.

But here’s the surprising thing that people have learned from these Zoom Coffee Hours: they like the *increased amount of time* that we can spend with each other, talking at length, talking in depth, getting to know one another at a new level, sharing ourselves in unexpected ways. And people worry about losing this.

You know how coffee hour can be: balancing a cup and donut hole, quickly checking in with one person, maybe catching someone else right before they leave—and then out those doors yourself, on to the rest of the day in the rest of the world. Many people want to find ways to have longer conversations, to make deeper connections, to sit around tables and take our time.

So while we don't hear about this in scripture—and these things weren't on the minds of Ezra or Nehemiah—tables and chairs might also be a necessary part of our infrastructure. We need them so that we might eat and talk together—and, yes, that time will come once more. Chairs mean that everyone will have a seat at the table—both literally and figuratively. Like the rest of our infrastructure, our tables and chairs support our ministry and mission.

We continue to move toward reopening and returning and resuming—toward the days when we will use the infrastructure of this place to support what we do here and far beyond our walls. We do all of this with the difficult awareness that pain and death, mourning and crying accompany us every step of the way.

But let us keep on this journey, remembering that we have always had a long vision—the new Jerusalem where the home of God will be among us, God's creatures, where God will dwell with us who were created in God's very image.

Let us pray:

God of consolation and comfort,

In the midst of hunger and war

may we hope in the promise of plenty and peace.

In the midst of oppression and tyranny

may we hope in the promise of service and freedom.

In the midst of doubt and despair

may we hope in the promise of faith and hope.

In the midst of fear and betrayal

may we hope in the promise of joy and loyalty.

In the midst of hatred and death

may we hope in the promise of love and life.

In the midst of sin and decay

may we hope in the promise of salvation and renewal.

In the midst of death on every side

may we hope in the promise of the living Christ. Amen.