

“Anxiety and Nehemiah” Neh. 1-6 (selected verses) 2/11/18

When I was a kid, my piano teacher entered me in half a dozen recitals and competitions each year. I generally enjoyed these, but sometimes I struggled with nervousness. It was the waiting that tended to work on my nerves, and since my last name starts with a “W,” I was always among the last to play. I remember one competition at American University with 42 competitors. I was last. But, once I began playing, I was usually OK, unless I made a serious mistake, or had a memory lapse. Then the anxiety came roaring back and it took everything I had not to just run off the stage!

A state university in New York conducted an experiment in which sheep were given small electric shocks to see what levels of fear and pain they could tolerate. As the sheep began to anticipate the upcoming shocks, they became increasingly anxious- and many of them actually died as their systems became devastated by fear! (I wonder where PETA was when they were doing that experiment?) Many of us can relate to the fact that fear and anxiety can be toxic to us- as we await medical test results, or as we wonder if our marriage can survive, or if we’ll still have a job next week, or if we’ll be able to pay the bills this month, or...you fill in the blank.

Anxiety is a constant reality for many of us. It can make us miserable and compromise our ability to make sound decisions.

Anxiety is also toxic to families and other groups, including churches. It can paralyze churches into inaction when action is needed, and it can cause panicked reactions when it would be better to stay the course. I raise this issue, because we are living in a time of anxiety and fear about the future in many of our churches. There are exceptions, but overall church attendance is down significantly in America. There are a number of reasons for this decline, including the wide variety of activities now competing for Sunday morning time, but there are just far fewer people committed to attending worship than there used to be.

As churches shrink in attendance, they are being forced to cut programs and mission funding, and many are closing their doors. As our own congregation has aged, our worship attendance and membership numbers have declined, and there are concerns about how we can continue to provide the level of staff, ministry, and mission that we have grown accustomed to. I'm sure that creates some anxiety for some of our elders and for some of you!

Fortunately, we have some biblical resources to help us with both our individual anxiety and congregational anxiety! The story of Nehemiah in the Old Testament is a case-study in managing anxiety! Let me set the context for the story. God's people, Israel, were overrun and defeated by the Babylonians in 586BC, and most of the population was carried off to

Babylon to serve the Babylonian empire there. About 60 years later, after the Persians had conquered the Babylonians, Nehemiah was serving in the court of the Persian King, Artaxerxes, when he received bad news from his home country of Israel. Jerusalem was lying in ruins and the people who remained there were struggling to survive. He was deeply saddened by this news, and asked the king for permission to return home and rebuild the city. The king, in keeping with Persian policy, allowed Nehemiah to return to begin this work, and even provided him with materials and letters of transit.

Nehemiah believed that he was now on a mission from God, just like the Blues Brothers! He says, *“And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.”* (Neh. 2:8b) The assurance that God was with him in this venture was key to his success when problems came. And they came very quickly! Listen to the very next verse. ⁹*Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me.* ¹⁰*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.* (Neh. 2:9,10) Sanballat and Tobiah were kings of rival cities in Canaan, and they were very leery of

a renewed Jerusalem in their backyard. As we'll see, they would do everything they could to see that Jerusalem would not be rebuilt!

Nehemiah makes it safely to Jerusalem. He decides the first priority is to rebuild the wall around the city so that it can be made secure. He does a little recon under cover of darkness to assess the scope of the project, which turns out to be massive! Then he calls the leading citizens together and announces his plan. *¹⁷Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace."¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.* (Neh. 2:17-18)

Nehemiah has provided the vision; the king has provided the materials; now the people must do the work, and they begin with great enthusiasm. That is how big projects often begin. In the next chapter Nehemiah skillfully organizes and divides the work among the people. But in chapter 4, the first problems appear. *Now when Sanballat (There he is again!) heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews.²He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews*

doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?” ³*Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!”* (Neh. 4:1-3) You gotta love the biblical trash-talking here! And these military leaders continued to threaten the Jewish people as they were building the wall.

Listen to how Nehemiah responds. ⁴*Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.* ⁵*Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.* ⁹*So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.* (Neh. 4:4,5,9) I love verse 9. “So we prayed to our God, and set a guard.” Nehemiah still firmly believes that God has ordained this mission of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, but he also realizes that he has a responsibility to protect his people as best he can. So he prays and posts a guard. The project continues, but with many more challenges to come.

¹⁰*But Judah said, “The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall.”* ¹¹*And our enemies said, “They will not know or see anything before we come upon*

them and kill them and stop the work.”¹² When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, “From all the places where they live they will come up against us.” (Can’t you just hear the hysteria building?)¹³ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.¹⁴ After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” (Neh. 4:10-14)

Nehemiah faces several daunting problems. The first is a labor problem; all this heavy work is wearing out the laborers! But the second is even more challenging; the people are afraid of the threats made by Sanballat and Tobiah to make a sneak attack on the workers. They are so anxious that they raise their fears ten times (!) to Nehemiah. The obvious conclusion, though unstated, is that this work must stop, that it’s simply too dangerous to continue in the presence of such peril. But again, Nehemiah shows wonderful leadership. He refuses to give in to fear, calling the people back to faith in their God. At the same time, he acknowledges the reality that they may need to fight, and he encourages them to fight hard.

He also responds to their fears by setting up a defense plan among the workers.

In the end, after still more challenges and plots, the wall is completed, and the city of Jerusalem begins to come back to life. Nehemiah has successfully led the people to achieve a great goal in spite of many obstacles, and the anxiety of his people.

So, what does this say to you, and to GPC in times of anxiety and fear? First, like Nehemiah, we need to remind ourselves that we are in God's hands. That in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, God "protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head..." Or, as Paul reminds us in Phil. 4, "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil. 4:6,7) Our starting point in dealing with anxiety is to remember that God is still in control of all things, including your life and our church! God has sustained this church through 277 years of ups and downs. He isn't about to let go of us now!

However, we need to be open to the new way of life into which God may be leading us. Although life was difficult back in Jerusalem prior to Nehemiah's coming, at least the people knew what to expect! Nehemiah's

project made things worse for them in the short-term, and they had no idea what would come next! As family therapist Virginia Satir has noted, “People prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty.” But sometimes God calls us into uncertainty, into something new, for God’s own purposes and reasons, be that in our personal lives or in our life together as a church.

Our Session is already talking about what our future together might look like. Can we make changes that would attract new people here to engage in God’s work with us? Or, what might a smaller GPC look like? How could we remain faithful to God’s call in either situation? These are not comfortable questions! They can even make me anxious! But, we return to the first point, and remind ourselves of God’s faithfulness, and continue to do the work to which God is calling us now, even if that work looks different from what we expected it to look like. That applies to our personal lives, too. Sometimes, we have to accept changes and limitations that we never envisioned or wanted. But God is faithful in every situation, and we have to learn ways to be faithful to God in the midst of those changes. It’s the kind of thing that both tests and builds our faith.

Fear and anxiety are inevitable for anyone who is alive! But they don’t have to control us. As writer Marilynne Robinson puts it, “Fear is not a Christian habit of mind.” “Fear is not a Christian habit of mind.” It’s

normal to have anxiety when our future is uncertain, but we don't have to dwell on that anxiety and let it take root in our hearts and minds. Learn to name your fears and confront them with the truth of God's Word and God's promises. Don't dwell in your fears or let them drive your decisions. Instead, dwell in the Lord, and trust that you and we are in God's good hands. As we sang earlier in the service, "*Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and God will be my Savior.*"