

Sermon: Part V “Praying for the Return and Restoration of What Once Was”

Scripture: Nehemiah 7:1-5a

By Rev. Derek White

Previous Weeks Summary:

This week is Part V of the sermon series on “Praying for the Return and Restoration of What Once Was”. Here is the sermon in a sentence from the past several weeks of the series.

- Part 1: “To get from **here** to **there**, it **all starts with prayer**” and “It takes the **right person**, in the **right place**, at the **right time**, doing the **right thing** for there to be success”.
- Part 2 : “Good leader **pause**, great leaders **pray first**”.
- Part 3: “Making **intentional decisions** vs. making **reactionary decisions**”.
- Part 4: “It takes **Faith** and **Hope** to be a **Beacon of inspiration**”.
- Part 5: God doesn’t have just **A PLAN** for our lives, God has **MANY PLANS** for our lives.

Part 1: (The Use of the Shofar)

I have brought with me today a Shofar. As you can see it is a horn. In ancient times this would have been used for the gathering of the people similar to the way church bells have been used. Today we use text messaging on mobile phones to send out alerts and the emergency alert system on the radio and TV to notify the community.

When Nehemiah had the people rebuilding the wall, there would have been a guard stationed with a horn like this one to blow and signal for the people to assemble. Now it could have been to assemble in order to make a military defense against attack. It could have been to make a public announcement of some significant importance. But it also would have been used to gather the people for special religious services like the rededication of the temple or a dedication of a significant event.

I had thought that today might be such an occasion to sound the shofar in order to celebrate that we have finally reopened the sanctuary to gather together in worship. But if I blow the shofar, then I am pushing air through it and spreading that air throughout the sanctuary. So I am not going to blow the shofar today. While today is something to celebrate, it is a small victory in the journey ahead. Not everyone can gather together in worship. So I think it is more fitting that the blowing of the shofar be reserved for a later date when we all can come together again and celebrate with everyone. The shofar will remain in the Pastor’s study ready for a date to be determined to be blown. And on that date there will be a celebration with choirs,

and music, and food, and festivities. It will be a similar celebration as described in **Nehemiah 12:27-30** with the rededication of Jerusalem.

Part 2: (Nehemiah 12:27-30)

In Nehemiah 12:27-30 all the people who have returned from exile gather to dedicate the walls. It says there are songs of thanksgiving with two choirs and cymbals, harps, and lyres (string instruments). It is a joyful gathering with lots of food. The dedication of the wall was not immediately done after the walls were rebuilt. The walls had to be rebuilt first to make it safe for the people to return. Once they felt it was safe to return and everyone was able to gather together, that is when the dedication service was held for the rebuilding of the wall.

(Wave 1 – Those who rebuilt the wall)

There were several waves of people returning to Jerusalem. The first wave of people returning were the ones that didn't go away into exile. They were the ones that were living in the countryside around Jerusalem. As the city was rebuilt they came back from their homes outside the city walls to live and trade again inside the city walls of Jerusalem. The first wave that returned are those who did the work to rebuild the wall.

(Wave 2 – Those who owned land in Jerusalem)

The second wave of those who returned were those who had a family connection to Jerusalem. One of the biggest challenges in the restoration of Jerusalem was trying to identify who had an ancestral claim to property as a result of the exile. Was there any unclaimed property? Even though they were not living in Jerusalem, they still had a claim to land and dwelling places in Jerusalem. Those who had proof of ownership were the second wave that returned once the wall was rebuilt.

(Wave 3 – Those who belonged to a tribe)

The third wave was those who were Jewish but they had no record of owning any land in Jerusalem. They had a right to return but they had no family homes or property to return to. Nehemiah had to work with Ezra the priest to help reestablish ancestral lines to determine what tribe the people belonged too. Even if they didn't own land, the tribe was responsible for caring for them. They would be allowed to purchase land or work in certain fields if they belonged to the tribe that owned it.

(Wave 4 – Those who wanted to join a tribe)

The fourth wave were those who had no genealogy records because they had been born in exile. They were not from Jerusalem, but they were invited to apply to join a tribe even if they could not trace their genealogy.

Part 3: (Gathering for Registration)

So today as you entered the sanctuary you may have noticed that there was a registration system for those who have chosen to gather inside the walls again. And like Nehemiah there is

a multi-layer approach of how we are restoring and returning to what once was. Today is the first phase of the regathering process. The goal is to take things step by step as we welcome more into the church over the next several months and next several years.

Things are a little different this morning, but that is a good thing. One of the positive things I want to share is that there was an intentional thought process of how to welcome people to the church that the re-opening committee made that I kept quiet about. And I kept quiet because it was one of those proud moments of seeing something beautiful happen naturally.

Several years ago I had a church plant group that was using an existing church building. And in the planning process for this church plant they walked through the building with all the entrances and exits and mapped out how to greet people from the sidewalk of the church to the sanctuary of the church. There was a natural flow of handoff so that every new person who came to the church would have five points of contact being greeted before they sat down for worship. It is an intentional part of a church planting plan to welcome people into the church and it is a highly effective model for church growth. So when the re-opening committee started doing a walkthrough of how to map out the way to guide people from the sidewalk to the sanctuary, I quietly rejoiced internally that the Holy Spirit was moving us in an intentional process.

Why is mapping out greeters to guide people to the sanctuary such a big deal? Those who have been here for a long time naturally know how to enter a sanctuary. The path into the sanctuary is something we probably never intentionally think of because it is familiar. You all probably know every unofficially assigned pew in the sanctuary. By that I mean where so and so always sits. Tradition is comforting when it is known. But this morning things were a little different, and think about how entering the sanctuary may have been a little confusing. That is how a new person coming to church feels on their first visit. They may not know the process for entering a sanctuary and it can feel foreign to them. So having volunteers to greet and hand off visitors from the sidewalk to the sanctuary is a good thing. The re-opening committee planning out and choreographing how to welcome and help people into the sanctuary recognized a need for you, the members, that will also help us grow in welcoming new people to church. So I quietly praised Jesus when I saw the good work that was being done in being intentional of how to greet, register, and welcome people into this sanctuary. Greeting people with five points of contact before entering the sanctuary is the new norm.

Part 4: (The First Phase)

Like I said, today is the first phase of the return, just like Nehemiah there was a first phase of a return to Jerusalem. There were those who historically had been part of Jerusalem even when it had been unoccupied. The first phase was for those who were familiar with the city. They were the ones who sustained it, and the ones who maintained it. Nehemiah didn't build Jerusalem, he revived Jerusalem. Think about it for a minute, Jerusalem is more than walls and gates, Jerusalem is the city where people gather to worship God. Anyone can patch

some walls and put on a fresh coat of paint, but it takes intentional planning to make spaces inside those walls and doors to feel like home again.

Let me phrase the first phase this way. When the first guests arrive to a party it feels good, but it feels better when the last person finally arrives. Today is just the beginning. As a matter of fact, Jesus emphasizes this in the parable of the wedding where the master sends out his servants to gather those who are still the remote areas to come to the celebration.

A lot of churches were not thinking about how to get new groups of people to come to church until they had to start think about how to get the old groups of people to come back to church. Churches that are still thinking how to maintain things through COVID will not do well. We are past the point of no return. We have to be intentional about recovery plans. We have to start thinking strategically with phases to recover and grow.

Conclusion: (How Does it Apply)

Throughout the account of Nehemiah we have seen not just a call to rebuild Jerusalem, but many phases of the restoration and the regathering a scattered people. God had more than just **A PLAN** for Nehemiah, God had **MANY PLANS** for Nehemiah.

God doesn't have just a plan for our lives, God has many plans for our lives. And in every time and in every season, there is a new phase of life to walk with the Lord our God. If there is anything we have learned over the last several months, it is the emphasis of phases. We as the Commonwealth are now in phase three with the re-opening of churches. All of life is a series of phases as we transition from one thing to the next. We often notice when these transitions happen. And it goes back to the message two weeks ago, are we intentional or reactionary in our decision making?

Are we planning for transitions that we know will come? Or are we waiting to react to transitions we know will come? Either way, we know transitions will happen. We all know the joke that if you want to make God laugh tell God your plan. Perhaps God laughs because if we only have one plan God knows it is not enough. It is better to walk intentionally with God through the phases of life than to always be asking why God with every change that happens.