

Repopulate with a Purpose

Nehemiah 11 & 12

The problem: a city too empty

The city is now considered holy because the temple has been built, the wall has been restored, and the law has been read publicly and responded to. At that point, however, Jerusalem was populated mainly by the leaders. It would take a lot more than just the leaders to make Jerusalem a thriving, well-protected city. At the end of chapter 10, we read "We will not neglect the house of our God." (10:39) Chapters 11 and 12 describe the way they repopulated the city. The last part of chapter 12 is from the Nehemiah Memoir, but the rest of it was written by another author(s).

To discern God's will, lots were cast (11:1-2) to determine who from the surrounding towns would relocate to Jerusalem. In short order, the population of Jerusalem was transformed! In chapter 11, the lists were drawn up with an eye to defending Jerusalem. The people recognized that an empty, defenseless city would just be a liability for the community, so they "blessed all those who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem." (11:2) The term "willingly offered" is a military term that describes their move as a service.

Imagine the turmoil in the lives of the people and in Jerusalem as this repopulation took place. Representative from all over arrive, mixing up the tribes and families. In society today, we see communities undergoing massive change as the demographic patterns radically reshape neighborhoods. When this happens, there are times that we see the local churches adapt and there are times we see the congregation flee. At Saint Matthew, we have seen a number of people faithfully stay connected through many, many changes as we seek together to provide ministries that are relevant to a changing world. In our day, we can say that they "will not neglect the house of our God," not for the sake of a building, but for the sake of the mission. Looking ahead, we need to learn new ways of practicing hospitality to the newcomers in our neighborhood.

As you consider the mission Jesus called us to serve in this part of the world, who needs to be recruited to be part of it? Who are the people that you know that need to "move to Jerusalem" to get engaged and reenter a faith community? Perhaps there are people you know that had been actively engaged in serving in God's Kingdom, yet somehow they've been scattered and are no longer part of any community.

A wide reach

The villages mentioned in this chapter (beginning with verse 25) stretch far beyond the province at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. It would take another 300 years, in the days of Jonathan the Macabee, for Israel to reach that extent. What faith, what hope they had at a time when they had to stretch just to repopulate Jerusalem. This same community that confessed "we are in great distress" (9:37) would someday inherit all the land promised through the ancestors and distributed through Joshua. This list of names and places connects the past, present and future for God's people.

We are at a time at Saint Matthew when we are about to build. We see on one hand the upcoming turmoil of building, changing worship schedules and so many other adjustments to usher in the next phase of our future. What happens when we dare to imagine the intended reach of God's kingdom that will be touched through the current and future ministries of Saint Matthew? Let us look ahead with hope and with faith to follow God's lead to work through us.

The Priests and Levites – enabling worship

Chapter 12 carefully mentioned priests, high priests, and Levites of this community to show how appropriate worship in this new age would be carried out. The post-exilic community was served with clerical continuity over the generations. This was an important part of their understanding of legitimate worship. Today, we see continuity not through ancestral lines,

but through the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit that works in our lives and empowers us to continue to serve the same Jesus Christ that called and sent the first disciples.

Dedication - a time of great joy and thanksgiving

This is a point of climax, the dedication of the wall. The work is done, the people are gathered, they are prepared to worship and in all of this, they continue to look to the Lord. What had been achieved was more than skillful administration by Nehemiah. It was God who had made them rejoice. Large choirs, great joy, many sacrifices of thanksgiving—all three of these adjectives in this sentence are expressed with one repeated Hebrew word: gudôlâ (great). Something big was happening here. This was a ceremony of dedication, 70 years after the dedication of the Temple in 515 BC. (Ezra 6:16) This was much more than a wall they were dedicating. This was a dedication of a revived and purified community, bound to the Law and fully outfitted with the spiritual leadership for this community to live in blessing and to be a blessing. It is no wonder that musicians were called from all around and this was a great celebration.

We are familiar with the Hebrew word for "dedication" which is "Hanukkah." That great Jewish festival, celebrated near Christmas by Jews even today, marks the rededication of the Second Temple after the victories of Judah the Maccabee. Nehemiah's wall dedication and the second-century Hanukkah remind the community how vulnerable it is and how often it has been delivered.

Their joyful noise bore witness far and wide to what God had done, surely recalling earlier pilgrimages and processions as in Psalm 48:12-14:

Circle Zion, take her measure,
count her fortress peaks,
Gaze long at her sloping bulwark,
climb her citadel heights—

Then you can tell the next generation detail by detail the story of God,
Our God forever,
who guides us till the end of time.

God had made them rejoice. The time for dedication of the walls was also a time for rededication to God: "Our God forever, who guides us till the end of time." Celebration is more than making a lot of noise or even rendering thanks to God. It is also a time for witness and praise, in which the community shares its experience with those who are far away.

Leadership Lesson

How do you apply the concept of "dedication?" We speak of people that are "dedicated" (Merriam-Webster: devoted to a cause, ideal, or purpose). To whom/what would people close to you say you are dedicated? What would your coworkers say? Your family? Your church family? Others? Does this question cause you to think of an area that needs to be rededicated or redirected?

Think of the multiple objectives that were met in this dedication. Not only were the people and the city set apart for the Lord, but the message of who they were in relationship to God was broadcast far and wide. We often think primarily of the message to the people gathered and don't dedicate as much attention to the ever widening ripples that (could) spread key messages. A dedication is a great witness opportunity.

Next Week: Reforms & Reminders (Nehemiah 12:44 – 13:31)