

## Dealing with Discouragement

### Bible Reading: Nehemiah 4

The Australia we live in today is a very different one to 50, 20 even 10 years ago. In the ever changing world we live in, we've been asking ourselves how it might look for us to 'rebuild a thriving church and neighbourhood'. Among the major shifts in our country, Christianity no longer has the privileged place it used to in our society. How do we be the church in our neighbourhood? How can we live for the peace and prosperity of a diverse multicultural secular nation? How can we be attentive and proactive neighbours? What is God saying to us at this time?

To help us with these questions, we've actually been exploring the Old Testament story of Nehemiah and the Jewish exiles who return to the ruin of Jerusalem. Like us, Nehemiah and his contemporaries lived in a world of convulsive change. When Nehemiah finds out his people are floundering among ruins he leads his people practically and powerfully to rebuild the walls of their city, to start afresh after many decades of exile. It's remarkable how these ancient stories in the Bible, speak into our own experience right here, right now. We're trusting that God will lead us and help us respond with wisdom and compassion through the complex shifts we are experiencing in our Australian social fabric in our day.

While such times can be disorienting and discouraging, our time **can also be an opportunity for us** to re-embrace our identity as God's people.

**God is way bigger than we can imagine. God is already at work in our neighbourhoods.**

**Take hope that God has a plan for us together and each of us has a part to play in it.**

Today, in our story, we'll see that whenever there's new energy for some good change, enemies come out of the woodwork to discourage us and stop us. We're going to look at strategies to overcome discouragement.

**Intro:**

One of my biggest experiences of discouragement happened when I first became a secondary school teacher, I had so much energy for the job initially. I'd just completed my DipEd. I was inexperienced and knew it would be hard at first, but I was enthusiastic and confident and I really wanted to make a positive difference. I found a job out in the West and I was ready to give my all to learn the art of teaching, but as the year started, there were just so many chaotic elements, many which were beyond my control... Students with severe family problems that required social workers more than teachers, senior teachers who were worn out and unhelpful, a supervisor that I found hard to get along with. I toughed it out for the whole year, but fatigue set in, I felt stuck and on my own and there just weren't enough wins to keep me afloat. It began to feel like I was entering a battleground everyday. I was never sure what I'd have to endure each day. I stopped being able to see the impact I was having. As discouragement set in I was weakened in my motivation and was more likely to compromise on my convictions just because I couldn't handle another battle...

Life is a battleground sometimes...When our positive energies are thwarted and frustrated, Discouragement is never far away. Discouragement comes as we hit setbacks, especially unexpected ones. Our motivation wanes in the battle, we start to seek some comfort from the pain of this often unanticipated struggle. Often in our search for comfort we become distracted from the task at hand, we lose heart, we give up, we compromise.

Discouragement happens to us all - let's not attempt to mask our discouragement - let's not ignore our empty tank!

Instead we need to ask ourselves, when discouragement does come how can we deal with it in such a way so that we are not sidelined by it? How can God strengthen us to get us back out there again, ready for the fight?

**Two impulses come to me when reading today's story:****First Impulse:**

First impulse is Sadness and disbelief towards enemies - 'You had to try to ruin that? Really?' It leaves me flirting with despair even at humankind at the meanness and destructiveness. 'Why did they have to do that? Why did somebody see this good thing happening and could only think 'let's ruin that', 'let's destroy them', 'let's keep their misery alive'.

**Second Impulse:**

I'm Inspired by this ragtag bunch getting together to work away amidst the ruins of their city. I want to go and cheer them on. Rebuilding takes guts. It is a defiant act of resistance. You can ruin our city and take us away but we will return home eventually,

and we will go out there into the rubble and we will rebuild it again. This is a massive 'no' to what the world throws at them. 'You will not be able to ruin what we have. You can scar it and mar it but we will get out our tools and restore it to how it was meant to be again'.

There is a certain kind of holiness to this courageous resistance. Things happen that are not right, they degrade people and rob us of our dignity. And sometimes simply refusing to go along with that madness is our only option. We have to refuse, we have to say no. We resist because any other response is letting the despair and the destruction win.

I call this the 'transcendent power of resistance'. Its transcendent, because it comes from God. God's story is soaked in it - I will not give up on this world, I will not stop loving it, I will stand up for what is good and holy and I will never stop until evil is defeated. Jesus is the glorious picture of this. He comes healing and restoring, standing up to the corrupt and dehumanising systems around him and is killed for it - all the while trusting that the transcendent power of resistance will win over the brokenness. The resurrection of Jesus is our testament to the power of God's love overpowering evil forever.

**Tikkun Olam** - To fix the world - the repair and restoration of the world. Tikkun Olam is taking part in the repair and restoration of the world. Its something God does and we actively participate in. God is looking for partners! Jesus spoke of the renewal of all things, one of his first disciples Peter talked about the restoration of all things, Paul spoke of the reconciliation of all things, putting things back together that have been torn apart. In a powerful way, those jews working to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem were working on Tikkun Olam. When we work for a thriving church and neighbourhood, restoring beauty, reconciling with one another we are working on Tikkun Olam too. Something gets defaced and we get together and say we're going to restore this to how it was intended to be. That's what we're doing - you and me. We're taking part in the repair, healing, restoration of the world (tikkun olam) because it is better to say 'no' and resist than to give in and participate in the kind of world that no-one wants to live in.

This transcendent Power of Resistance/ Tikkun Olam sounds very impressive but it is most often found in the small acts and the quiet deeds that no-one ever sees. Spinal fortitude - you will not do that here - we will make this right again.

At the heart of such stories is this insistence that your actions matter - whatever you do, do it for the Lord. Your actions are part of a story far greater that you may not even be fully aware of.

**V 1 - 6 Ridicule - Prayer - build half the wall with all their heart.**

The people were ridiculed, they prayed through it together, they rallied strength, and they worked with all their heart.'

**That was only round 1, now comes Round 2:**

But what happens next: **V 7 - 9**

2. Enemy escalates to threats of violence and murder - prayer and action (posting a guard day and night to meet the threat) - but...

Jews start to listen to discouraging voices:

**What are the voices of discouragement we tend to listen to?**

**'Look at this rubble (v10)      overwhelmed by chaos      - listen to beauty**

When you decide that 'ugly' isn't going to win, that is a deeply divine course of action.

Resistance can mean no longer listening to the discouraging voice that says 'it's too far gone, ugliness has set in, the rubble and fall out from this or that situation is just too hard to clean up'. Instead listen to the inspirational voice of beauty: insist that this is going to be ordered, clutter free, beautiful and creative.

This voice of beauty can be revolutionary: the world in all its activity can etch on your heart a very destructive belief that you are only as good as what you produce, your achievements, your money. Beauty reminds us that productivity is not God's highest goal for our life, joy is.

**Listening to enemies (v11)      giving in to bitterness      - open to goodness**

Have you had people really let you down before? To the point where when you just think about it, you get hot under your skin, like you're going to boil. There is a part of me that wants to take their indifference and how they failed me and generalise it. Do you ever have that impulse? Someone betrays you so then all people can't be trusted? Somebody fails you and suddenly nobody is any good? You know that thing that can happen where you take a particular experience and you universalise it.

Bitterness is right there and its just waiting to get a hold of your heart. Resistance is simply when you say I will not fall prey to bitterness here. That's transcendent power of resistance - when you recognise this thing lurking at your hearts door and you say no. There is a divine power in that no.

**Discouraged friends      v12      succumbing to negativity**

There is this general toxic negativity that can often become the dominant language in any group of friends, office, family, school or community. People say things like 'nobody cares anymore' and 'everybody's just concerned with making money' These are general negative comments - but maybe you do know somebody who is not only concerned with making money, maybe there's someone who does care, and then suddenly what that person is saying is not true. 'Why are religious people like this...' 'Everyone working in the government is like that...' No, I know people who aren't like

that. So sometimes resistance is simply saying 'I don't agree and I will not participate in that toxic vortex of negativity. I see lots of thrilling and fresh and redemptive things going on all around me, yes, the world is broken and yes lots of folks are in trouble, but sometimes resistance is just refusing to live in a small world of generalisations about what everybody is and isn't doing. There are too many deviations, too many surprises, there is too much good news popping up all around us to do that. Sometimes resistance means you are not going to talk like that.

When considering what voice I listen to...

Whatever you look for, you will find. If you look for destruction and cruelty and despair and betrayal, you'll find it. If you're looking for people who don't get it, who aren't as enlightened as you are, you'll find them. What you look for you will find. If you set out and you look for renewal and restoration, if you look for healing, if you look for new and fresh redemptive work in the world, you will also be able to find that. So what you look for you will find it. I look for Tikkun Olam/transcendent power of resistance.

### **Round 3 (V 13 - 15) - Solid Leadership required**

Nehemiah comes in with some solid leadership - 3 things

**Why is not as interesting as What** - why do people ruin good things, why do people betray each other, why do people in the face of their own pain, choose to entrench themselves in bitterness and meanness. Why can people be so cruel? Why is not as interesting as it used to be. It is a very important question when you are first growing up to just how dangerous and broken the world is. Why can be an important question at first as you realise for the first time just how fragile the whole thing is. But if you keep going and you keep growing, asking the why questions becomes less interesting than the what question. Sometimes you can find answers to why people do the things they do, but more often its just a great mystery. The human heart is a mysterious thing. 'What' becomes more interesting. Yes, things are broken, yeah, its a mess, yeah, people are mean, so what are we going to do now? what tikkun olam is there for us to join in. Because you have energy and power. You have been given life, and you get to do something with it. You get to do something with what you've been given. You can spend that energy trying to figure out why people do what they do, you can spend that energy becoming cynical and criticising and becoming bitter. You can do that. We all can - its easy. But this is energy we could spend answering the question 'what good is going to come out of even this?' What am I going to do in response to this? Can something new and good and healing arise out of even this?

Nehemiah reorganises practically to waylay fear - Rallies to action to resist discouragement

**V 16 - 18 - Defending your ground - its going to take a little more time.**

We want to get things done but sometimes it takes all our strength just to resist. We might have other things we'd rather be doing but we have to spend our energy just getting back to zero. There's a mess here or there and you've just got to clean it up. Sometimes you don't have a lot of energy to build something new and fancy and impressive because it took all your strength just to resist the chaos that seems to hang over us sometimes. That's ok. Right now you're resisting and that's what's taking your energy. You've done all that work, just to get back to zero. It doesn't appear that things are moving forward - but sometimes resistance is the victory. Let yourself off the hook with your to-do list. You just have to say 'aahhh, I got back to zero', which means, by the way, that the negative didn't win.

### **V19 - 20 - Calls for his people to Support each other**

The trumpet - we gather on Sundays but during the week we are scattered. We can be there to support each other in times of discouragement.

#### **Two questions to wrap this up:**

Is there anything that you've been participating in that is creating a world that you don't want to live in? And so you need to resist it. Any negativity, any ugliness. The truth is that when you spending your energy on that, you are helping create a world that you don't actually want to live in. And so, here's the thing. Tap into the transcendent and transformative power of resistance, which comes from God. Just quit, Refuse, Walk away. Sometimes we need to tap into the divine sacred energy of a good 'no'. No, I will not be a part of that anymore. There is something so beautiful and redemptive and healing about that.

Secondly, is there something around you that is broken, defaced, defiled, tarnished? And it has enraged you or frustrated you, somebody needs to do something about it and perhaps that someone is you. Sometimes we find our path in life through something we love. We stumble into something we love and we put our energy into it and talk about how much we love the work or going there or helping people in that way. And sometimes we find our path in life through listening to our anger, to what righteously and divinely upsets us. Something needs to be repaired and restored. We see it and there's something wrong - it needs fixing. So you channel all that frustration and anger into something good and restoring - something involving tikkun olam. You reach down into your spine and gather whatever strength, courage and resolve and power you have and you say 'I am not going to let that go on'.

May you, my brothers and sisters, not be discouraged. Instead, tap into God's transcendent power of resistance. May you reach down and muster up a strong divine no to the madness you see around you - whatever it is - may you resist what needs to be resisted so you can take part in the healing and repair of the world. May grace and peace be with you.

**Benediction**

Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

**Front Page of The Circle (Our weekly bulletin)**

Discouragement is something common to us all. Dealing with it requires a balance of both tenderness and toughness. But either way discouragement is not to be wallowed in. Lingering in discouragement can be costly. Its sense of defeat and hopelessness saps us of energy and vision. It can sideline us for a long time and can be contagious, weakening the resilience of those around us.

When we feel discouraged we want comfort, which is right to feel. But the comforts we often turn to are more about avoidance than about mustering courage to face things again. In this way, discouragement settles into unbelief and cynicism as a comfort to the pain of hopes being dashed.

Listen to what Jesus says to his disciples just before what probably was the most discouraging experience of their lives — Jesus' brutal death: "Let not your hearts be troubled." He knew things were going to look very bad, like their whole mission was imploding. What were they to do instead of being discouraged? Believe! "Believe in God; believe also in me." (John 14:1)

In other words, Jesus is saying, 'Don't let your hearts be ruled by what you see. Let them be ruled by what I have promised you.' And that's what he's saying to us too.

What's tempting you to discouragement today? Are you having a hard time believing that God really will work his goodness into what looks so bad to you (Romans 8:28)? Then it's time to resist. Let's not shrink away.

Think of discouragement as your faith being choked. When you're choking, it's not the time to plop down in front of the TV with a plate of comfort food to medicate your melancholy. You need to dislodge that obstruction so you can breathe. You need to fight for life. You may need to get someone to give you the Heimlich!