

**16 June 2024**

**Psalm 124:1-8**

**John 17:18-20**

**Nehemiah 2:18-20**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I bring greetings to you from the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and from the St. Paul's Lutheran congregation, York, Pennsylvania.

The people of St. Paul's have been incredibly supportive of this trip to Tukuyu to be with you.

We are overjoyed that we can be present with you physically today to share in fellowship, and offering to God our prayer, praise and thanksgivings.

Thank you to your Bishop for extending this invitation to us, and to all of you who have made our stay so comfortable, informative, and memorable.

We are truly blessed by all of your outpourings of welcome, affection and love. And I am both honored and humbled to be invited to preach on this Lord's Day. Thank you.

Setting out to build anything is a huge task. Setting out to rebuild something brings challenges associated with what was, and how to remake it into what shall be.

Building, setting out to build anything worthwhile has the capacity to provide a community with an enduring legacy. The legacy is often shaped by the leadership needed to bring such vision to completion.

Nehemiah was just such a man.

He set out to build, or rebuild the fallen down crumbling wall surrounding the holy city of Jerusalem.

This takes place about 100 years after the exile. This was when King Nebuchadnezzar permitted God's people to return to their own land, and to their own city.

Nehemiah had managed to make his way into the top levels of society in the Persian Empire. In those days the Persian Empire was the place to be. Most people aspired to be part of such social circles. But Nehemiah's heart remained in Jerusalem.

In those days Jerusalem was a small troublesome place, far from the center of power, devoid of prestige, and no place for any thought of political advancement.

So when Nehemiah wanted to go back to Jerusalem he was surprised to find the city uninhabited. The Temple had been rebuilt, but the walls that provided protection for the people were in ruin.

Most of the people were living in the outlying areas. They mixed with all kinds of foreigners and they were at risk of losing their identity as God's people.

In the outlying villages they encountered many things that were not of God, not of the God who had brought them across the Red Sea, and the one who made a way for them to return from exile.

The people were being integrated into a pagan culture. They were losing their language, losing their culture and most notably losing their religion.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he quickly assessed the situation. He set out to rebuild the walls that once afforded God's people protection from their enemies, provided a place in which they could speak the same language, observe festivals, and maintain religious traditions.

Nehemiah didn't manage to do this just because he was a good manager, just because he was organized and pragmatic. He accomplished this because he was a man of God.

He was diligent in prayer. His prayers punctuate the entire Book of Nehemiah.

He recognized God's rule in all that happened and throughout all of the ups and downs of building, and rebuilding, he never forgot to give God credit.

But living in that place at that time, there were people who sought political power over religious identity. They saw ways to make money by scheming and taking advantage of people, their land and their family members.

So the likes of Sanballat the Horonite; and Tobiah the Ammorite; and Geshem the Arab, they all tried to keep Nehemiah from rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem.

But then all of the people responded to Nehemiah's vision and they said "Let us start building."

Can you imagine what that must have sounded like?

Go ahead please shout out with me "Let us start building!"

*(the people shout out together)*

And just as they had shouted together they pulled together to do work; and it wasn't just people who specialized in stone masonry or timber framing.

The goldsmiths, perfumers, and merchants all worked together to make the necessary repairs to the wall that surrounded the city of Jerusalem.

Different groups worked on different sections and by so doing they rebuilt; the Sheep Gate, the Fish gate, the Old Gate,

the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate (the Dung Gate would not have been the one that I would have wanted to work on!)

the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, the Horse Gate and the East Gate.

Others worked on restoring pools for water and refreshment.

They worked day by day. Together they made repairs and it angered and enraged the politicians!

The politicians liked it the way it was so that they could collect taxes and charge interest and confiscate fields and houses and orchards and vineyards.

When the people could not pay their taxes or pay the interest on their loans or make payments, the politicians confiscated their women and children and sold them into slavery.

Nehemiah knew that such behavior and practice needed to end. So God's people worked quickly to build the wall and restore their way of life.

With the people responding to the leadership of Nehemiah the wall was finished in 52 days!

And all of the enemies; the likes of Sanballat the Horonite; and Tobiah the Ammorite; and Geshem the Arab along with the politicians, they were all afraid because they knew that the work rebuilding the wall was accomplished with the help of God!

So the wall was built. But there were still no inhabitants.

Who would live in the city now that the wall was restored, now that there was protection, a place to speak their own language and practice their religious faith?

Nehemiah reconstructed the genealogy of those who came out of captivity from King Nebuchadnezzar. These were the people whose heritage it was to live and populate the holy city Jerusalem.

Keeping track of your roots and origins is important.

Nehemiah reported that there were 42,360 in the assembly, plus their male and female servants numbering 7,337, plus 245 singers.

Then the Priest Ezra brought out the book of the Law. Ezra read from the book of the Law and both men and women heard and understood the book.

There were many things that seemed new and different for them as they reclaimed their religious identity and culture. Somethings seemed to be burdensome.

It was however, as Ezra read from the Book of the Law, the eighth day.

And while everyone looked serious about what keeping the Law of the Lord might mean for them, the eighth day was commanded a celebration! And so they rejoiced before God.

You set out to build a new church building. This is to be a place of protection from the elements, a place where the traditions and customs and celebrations of God and God's people are celebrated.

You had a vision.

You prayed.

You worked together,

and not just the brick masons and the plasterers, but everyone making offerings and contributing to bring about this building for the glory of God and in the service and love for neighbors.

This stands as an enduring legacy for this community. And we give God the credit for what has been accomplished in this place.

As Christian people the eighth day for us is a day of celebration as we remember the resurrection of our Lord; when God raised Jesus from death to life.

Though him, with him, in him we have our unity.

Through Christ Jesus we are grafted onto the tree of life through the sacrament of Holy Baptism and we find our genealogical home as heirs of his salvation.

We are sisters and brothers in Christ.

Our unity is in the genealogy given to us by our loving Lord Jesus who died on the tree of the cross in order that we might have life and have it abundantly.

We receive the Sacrament of the Altar keeping secure the roots of faith and life in Christ Jesus.

We come together today to lay the corner stone for this building, a magnificent achievement. An achievement accomplished most certainly with God's help!

We celebrate the building of a sacred place for worship, not to keep any one out, but to welcome all, to welcome people into knowing and learning of the ways of God.

Here we learn the Ten Commandments.

Here we learn to prayer "Our Father."

Here we hold tightly the Lutheran Confessional writings and embrace the Holy Scriptures as normative for faith and life.

Here we make disciples by baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Here we receive the forgiveness of our sins and are strengthened for daily service in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Here we hear the preaching of God's Word and gladly receive it making it our own so that we live as God's holy people.

Here we sing praise to God for all of the wonderful things that he has done, is doing, and promises yet to do!

These are the things that shape our identity as Lutheran Christians, nourish us for service in love of our neighbor, and keep us united, here and around the world, through the suffering death and resurrection of Jesus, God's beloved Son.

Setting out to build anything is a huge task. Setting out to rebuild something brings challenges associated with what was, and how to remake it into what it shall be.

Building, setting out to build anything worthwhile has the capacity to provide a community with an enduring legacy. You have done that here as the Mpuguso congregation.

The legacy is often shaped by the leadership needed to bring such vision to completion. In those days, after God's exiled people were able to return to Jerusalem, they had Nehemiah.

You have been blessed with solid faithful leadership, Bishop, Pastor, Elders, mission partners and a vision uniting God's people here in Tukuyu.

This building is a sign for all to see that this has been accomplished with the help of God!

And the 42,360, their 7,337 servants and the 245 singers praised God for restoration,

praised God for protection,

praised God for deliverance

praised God for future hope,

the hope that only our loving Savior, Jesus Christ brings for you.

Amen.