



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for July 3, 2022
“Lessons in Leadership: Casting a Vision”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Nehemiah 2:11-18

Casting a Vision

We finally got it right. After struggling for quite some time with my contacts, my optometrist and I were able to strike on the right combination of contacts that allows me to see both near and far. I can't tell you how elated I am.

Vision is right important, just ask those who can't see very well. To get one's vision right can make all the difference in the world. That's certainly true when it comes to *casting* a vision. To be able to see clearly what others may not be able to see also makes a big difference.

An Up, Down, and All-Around Sort of Thing

I have found that casting a vision is an up, down, and all-around sort of thing.

- First, casting a vision takes faith. That's where the **up** component comes in. Faith in the leadership of God certainly puts us on the right track.
- The writer of Hebrews puts it right when he says, “*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*” (Hebrews 11:1)
- The **down** component of casting a vision has to do with grounding vision in real life. We always need to be asking how the vision we cast plays out in everyday life.
- The **all-around** component of casting a vision has to do with that vision making a difference. We need to ask not only how we will be affected, but how others will be as well.

Nowhere Without Vision

We get nowhere without a vision. Without a vision, we will find ourselves more like a bottle adrift on the ocean, cast here and there by whatever wave comes our way. Proverbs 29:18 reminds us that “*where there is no vision, the people perish.*” And so do we.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem

I will never forget making our way into the City of Jerusalem for the first time during our trip to the Holy Land a few years back. We were traveling from the Sea of Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. The views from our tour bus were extraordinary. There were mountains and deserts, shepherds, and sheep, and even a couple of camels for good measure.

The main road into Jerusalem from the north is a four-lane highway, not unlike the expressways we have here in the states.

As you make your way along that highway the Holy City is hidden from view by a set of mountains. Immediately, though, the road takes a bend, there's a short tunnel, and before your eyes is the Old City in all its glory. The scene almost takes your breath away.

To add a dramatic flair to things our tour guide played over the bus's public address system a stirring rendition of that great song *The Holy City* by Stephen Adams and Frederick Weatherly. "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Lift up your gates and sing. Hosanna in the highest, hosanna to your king.*"

If you aren't stirred by that you need to check your pulse. It was bright and sunny the day we arrived. The city looked marvelous, almost surreal. It was a sight to behold. Not so, the day Nehemiah made his way into the Holy City.

Let's read about that as we turn to Nehemiah 2:11-18.

Nehemiah 2:11-18

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So, they began this good work.

Surveying the Problem

If you remember, Nehemiah came from Susa in Persia with the permission of King Artaxerxes. His expressed intent was to re-build the city walls around Jerusalem that had been destroyed at the hands of the Babylonians some 140 years earlier. What he found was worse than he ever imagined.

I love the detail the scripture offers. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah spent three days just sort of gathering himself. I am sure he needed a little time to recoup from the long trip. I am sure he also needed a little time with the Lord. What Nehemiah was about to embark on was well beyond him, save for God's help.

After three days, Nehemiah and a few trusted friends began to survey the walls. Interestingly, they did so at night. Nehemiah needed to see for himself what he was up against without a lot of people looking on. There was a part of him that wanted to digest what he was up against by himself.

Nehemiah needed time to let things wash over him. He needed the space to process things in his own way and in his own time.

I'm like that. When faced with some problem or challenge I need space to process things. I need time to get my arms around what's at hand. Above all things, I take time to pray.

I'm of the mind that Nehemiah took that sort of time and sought that sort of space as he struck out in the middle of the night to survey where the city walls once stood. Nehemiah was not at all afraid to face a challenge and work to find a solution.

He was open to facing the facts as they presented themselves. He was even willing to name them. He also went so far as to make sure others were aware as well. With Nehemiah, there was no putting his head in the sand.

Stating the Problem

We learn from our passage for today that Nehemiah was quick to state the problem. For him, there was no sugarcoating things. He called things like he saw them. Upon making his way around the city Nehemiah found things in far worse condition than he first thought. Things were so bad the donkey he was riding was unable to proceed through the rubble.

If a leader has a hard time stating the problem, then that leader will have a hard time facing the problem, much less dealing with it. For some leaders, problems have a way of paralyzing them and because of that the people and organizations they lead never grow. Sometimes though, problems have an opposite effect. They can energize a leader to the extent that he/she gets off his/her duff and works toward a solution.

At Kentucky Wesleyan College where I am on the Board of Trustees, we have gone through some pretty tough times financially. We have even been put on warning by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. We faced facts and got after our finances. We became laser-focused on them and have turned things around.

Nehemiah writes, *"You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt."* In a very real way, Nehemiah was a realist.

- He didn't mince words.
- He didn't try to window dress.
- He didn't try to sweep things under the rug.
- He exercised leadership by stating the problem.

Let's Get Started

When it comes to leadership it's not enough to simply state the problem. Somewhere along the line you've got to do something about it. A good way to do that is in casting a clear and compelling vision and then invite others to join you in meeting that vision.

That's what Nehemiah did in eventually coming before the citizens of Jerusalem. He knew they had to get started somewhere. It wasn't enough for him to say, *"See the trouble we are in."* He followed that by saying, *"Let's start building."* By so doing, Nehemiah cast a vision and invited others to join him in that.

A clear and compelling vision has an attractional quality to it. People have a way of coming around a vision that is clearly stated and compels them toward a bright future.

Years ago, Howard Schnellenberger, God rest his soul, confidently stated that *“University of Louisville football is on a collision course with a national championship, the only variable is time.”* We’re still waiting. As you know that vision turned things around. People were energized, even when the team was losing. That vision propelled that program toward a much brighter future.

Drawn Toward a Preferred Future

Vision is that which draws people toward their preferred future. For the church, vision is that which draws every believer to the future God has for them. For us, our vision as a church is to *“make a difference by following Christ, offering Hope, serving Others, and loving Everyone.”*

We have understood that to be God’s preferred future for us. We’ll be talking a lot more about that later this summer.

Realizing one’s vision doesn’t just happen. It takes leadership to bring it to pass. The vision of restoring the walls around Jerusalem would have never been realized if it were not for the leadership of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was convinced that building the walls was part of God’s preferred future for his people. Nehemiah not only caught God’s vision but gave it life.

While a clear and compelling vision is important and has a certain attractational quality to it, it is leadership around that vision that gives it legs. That’s where you and I come into play.

Let’s Start Building

“Let’s start building” were the words Nehemiah spoke in challenging the people to re-build the walls around Jerusalem. And think of it, he did that against the backdrop of a pile of rubble.

What kind of vision are you offering to a troubled and broken world, a pile of rubble if you will?

- Against the backdrop all sorts of divisions, how are you challenging others to acts of peace and reconciliation?
- Against the backdrop of a lost world, in what ways are you casting a vision that leads others to the saving grace of Jesus Christ?
- Against the backdrop of countless numbers of people needing direction, how are you casting a vision for regular, on-going discipleship?
- Against the backdrop of so much need, how are you challenging people to do acts of service?
- How are you being a leader in advancing a clear and compelling vision to those who are around you?

Committed to a Common Vision

The scripture tells us in Nehemiah 2:18 that the people *“committed themselves to the common good.”* They came together around a common vision and, by doing that, were able to accomplish great things.

Again, our vision is to *“make a difference by following Christ, offering Hope, serving Others, and loving Everyone.”*

I am convinced that this is God’s vision for us, and I pray every day that we are living into it by:

- Following Christ.
- Offering Hope.
- Serving Others.
- And Loving Everyone.

While we don't have any walls to re-build, we do have work to do and a vision to fulfill. There is something clear and compelling about making a difference in Christ's name. What is needed are leaders open to catching that vision and seeing it through. Let's get to it.