



Restoring the Walls: Reading Nehemiah in a Time of Tenuous Ecclesial Identity

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Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together . . . peace be
within your walls.

—Psalm 122:3, 7

On the morning of his inauguration, in a private service held at St. John's Episcopal Church near the White House, Donald J. Trump heard a sermon from Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress likening the president-elect to Nehemiah. "God is not against building walls!" exclaimed Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas, whom Trump had personally selected for the occasion, early in his remarks. He then proceeded to lift up three leadership principles he had extracted from the story of the postexilic governor and rebuilders of Jerusalem's walls; advice, as it were, from one "God-chosen" leader to another: (1) don't allow your critics to

Walls need not only be divisive. The need for healthy boundaries that protect is ever apparent in our culture, as long as such barriers do not needlessly divide. Working off the stories of the rebuilding and blessing of the wall of Jerusalem, the biblical narrative illustrates the way walls can be used for the good of individuals, families, and communities.

distract you, (2) don't let setbacks stop you, and (3) seek God's help to empower you and give you success.¹

In addition to rather blatantly failing what might be called the Führer test (Could this sermon have functioned equally well to endorse Adolf Hitler?), Jeffress's message rehashed a simplistic analogy between biblical Israel and America that has been popular—and destructive—since colonial times. What may be new with Jeffress, and with many others on the religious right similarly drawn to this Nehemiah-Trump connection, is that the old habit has been updated to suit a time and a constituency longing for restoration of a nation's mythic glory. One looks for a Make Israel Great Again moment in Scripture to match the mood and ambitions of the movement and finds, most conveniently, Ezra-Nehemiah.

For those of us appalled by such crude appropriation who also claim to be guided by the Bible, the question is raised: What then do Nehemiah and his wall-building project mean to us? Do they mean anything? Does not silence on such a significant and canonical chapter in the biblical story only makes it more vulnerable to nationalist abuse? While we likely won't be preaching on Nehemiah anytime soon—his memoir (Neh 1:1–7:5; 11:1–13:31) is absent from the Revised Common Lectionary and also the Narrative Lectionary—is there a churchly use, pertinent in the contemporary US setting, that could offset ideology and upbuild the people of God?

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Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king, stationed in Susa, when a contingent led by his brother Hanani provided him a firsthand report on the situation back home. “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire” (Neh 1:3). Nehemiah is devastated by the news. His knees will not hold up to such a reality. He sits down and weeps, mourning and fasting for days, his heart turned immediately to prayer. As he remembers it:

I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned.

¹ The full text of the sermon, entitled “When God Chooses a Leader,” can be found online: Sarah Puliam Bailey, “‘God Is Not against Building Walls!’ The Sermon Trump Heard from Robert Jeffress Before His Inauguration,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yxoo6vo4>.

We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.' They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name." (Neh 1:5–11a)

With a view to its theological function, Manfred Oeming identifies this prayer of confession in the first chapter of Nehemiah as the "blueprint for the entire book."² Political, economic, national, and military aspects of the wall-building project that follow must be kept in a secondary place to the symbolic meaning of the restored wall as an affirmation that the Jews "are [still] your servants and your people, whom you redeemed." More than a safeguard against enemy attack,³ and, in practical terms, hardly adequate for preventing intermixing with gentiles, the wall is a bricks-and-mortar act of repentance and trust in the enduring validity of Yahweh's promise. From the perspective of Nehemiah and everyone he mobilizes (Neh 3:1–32), having a wall around Jerusalem is essential to removing the people's shame (Neh 1:3) and ending their period of "disgrace" (Neh 2:17). Nehemiah is not just soft-pedaling his intentions when he repeats before King Artaxerxes that the source of his sadness has to do with "the place of my ancestors' graves" lying waste (Neh 2:3, 5). The crumbled, fire-scalded walls and gates are genuinely of a piece in Nehemiah's mind with the defiled graves of his ancestors. How can we hold up our heads and believe that we are truly God's people without a boundary, a marker in the earth that we are loved?

Shift to the situation of contemporary Christians striving to keep the faith in a US context in a denomination like one in which I serve, the ELCA. The reports of destruction and disrepair are manifold. The cries particularly of those with the longest memories, the old, are encapsulated in the words of one of my former parishioners, Harold, just a few months before his death: "Pastor, what has happened to our beloved church?" While the restorationist impulse may not always be strong in a denomination infused with a progressive spirit, innovation cannot be the *only* way forward (Look! We're having church in a bar! Church in a

² Manfred Oeming, "The Real History: The Theological Ideas behind Nehemiah's Wall," in *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 140.

³ If anything, in the narrative that follows, it antagonizes the other local subject peoples of Persia and escalates the potential for violence. Regarding the wall's efficacy for defense, Oeming cites the judgment of historian Nadav Na'aman that based on the small number of people involved, fifty-two-day building period, and general lack of archeological evidence, it must have been "thin" and "fragmentary," "an enclosure rather than a city wall." Oeming "Real History," 132–33.

barn! Church in a city plaza—without walls!). There is value also in looking back and asking what our identity markers have been, the tangible hallmarks that were indispensable for honoring God and, in some sense, sharing in that honor. Far too much of our grief has been oriented around numerical decline. The postexilic witness would point us more to what certainly feels like the real issue, at least from my vantage point as a pastor—not decline so much as diffusion. We have become like a glass of water without the glass, all the while trumpeting that all are welcome to come and drink.

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As a literal structure of separation, particularly for keeping people out or ensuring purity, wall-building (as though part of God’s timeless playbook available to any *volk* needing to shore up their national or ethnic identity) should be of little interest to a people conformed to the Christ of the gospels. As a figure,⁴ however, let us see if it doesn’t hold some promise. What from the past, which has lent us both definition—a perceivable sense that we are “God’s own people” (1 Pet 2:9)—and evangelical focus, lies in disrepair and calls for restoration? At least three things stand out.

One must go back a ways to see this, but the tradition of the adolescent confirmation program is essentially a remaining edifice from a larger crumbled structure of lifelong catechesis. Was the structure ever complete or especially grand? Perhaps not. But the book of Nehemiah would encourage us to remember it being so. What has been validated time and again by experience is that a standalone process of catechesis for middle schoolers is woefully inadequate for creating and sustaining a personal sense of union with the church. Like a remnant of one of Jerusalem’s gates strangely unscathed by the Babylonians, it may garner a great deal of attention and even efforts at preservation but without the rest of the structure hardly makes sense.

Luther, of course, had something different in mind in producing his *Small Catechism*. He intended for the basics, articulated in down-to-earth language, to be preached on, recited, prayed through, and taken to heart at every age and stage.

⁴ I am following Ephraim Radner’s definition of figural exegesis: “a general designation for *any* exegetical denotation that relies upon the intersignificatory coherence between diverse biblical texts and their referents, which may also extend their reach to nonbiblical events within history, especially the history of the Church. Thus, typology, reiterated and reapplied metaphor, allegory, and so on all fall into the category of ‘figural’ reading.” Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 29.

Building out from this to include the importance of other “reified” resources of faith, Jessica Krey Duckworth writes:

Congregations desperately need a cruciform catechesis through engagement with . . . the central works of a broadly conceived “deposit of faith.” This would include the Bible itself, the church’s ancient creeds and liturgical foundation, and the catechisms and disciplines of faith developed by later generations that together form an essential corpus of a Lutheran inheritance within the Christian tradition. By articulating a confession of faith, disciples are gathered to recall the story and make present again the joint enterprises and meanings of the past.⁵

Notice how similar this sounds to the priest Ezra’s reading of the law of Moses (together with help from his fleet of interpreters) before all the assembly of the returned exiles (Nehemiah 8). Fresh exposure to traditional text and also the traditional practice of keeping the festival restore to the people an identity that had nearly faded into history. Now they can begin to resume as daily practice obedience to the charge given when their ancestors had settled the land the first time: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut 6:6–7).

Once the community begins to seriously hear and steward their primary resource of faith, their corporate identity cannot help but take on a bounded quality to it. In our own church context, steeped increasingly as we are in a hermeneutic of inclusion, we grow strangely nervous about our own inheritance, whether it may prove off-putting to the newcomer or unfashionable to the young.

Not by accident did the editors of Ezra-Nehemiah detach this pivotal reopening of the sacred book from its historical sequence and sandwich it between the completion of Jerusalem’s wall and the wall’s dedication. Once the community begins to seriously hear and steward their primary resource of faith, their corporate identity cannot help but take on a bounded quality to it. In our own church context, steeped increasingly as we are in a hermeneutic of inclusion, we grow strangely nervous about our own inheritance, whether it may prove off-putting to the newcomer or unfashionable to the young. The ecumenical creeds and classic confessions like Augsburg, with its refrain of “it is taught . . . rejected are . . .” become particularly vulnerable to neglect because their boundary-defining function is so overt and foreign to our sensibilities.

⁵ Jessica Krey Duckworth, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 105. To this list I would also add a broad, global canon of hymnody.

It is undeniably part of the story that as resettled Israel responded to Ezra's proclamation with a renewed confession of faith, they first "separated themselves from all foreigners" (Neh 9:2). And surely the original symbolism of the rebuilt wall did have to do with keeping Torah by keeping the Other out. In an evangelical application of the figure, however, the outsider is indispensable. Indeed, the surge of congregational efforts to reconstruct the catechumenate in our day—undoubtedly one of the most encouraging examples of building a future by restoring the past—practice welcome, as Duckworth explains, by putting established insiders and inquiring seekers in relationships of mutual learning around faith's primary sources and the questions those sources elicit. In a paradoxical sense, we need the newcomer and the oldcomer dwelling together around the core resources of faith in order for the boundary to actually come into view. As Kathryn Tanner has stated, "[The] distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed by the boundary as *at it*."⁶

A second, much-battered wall that calls urgently for restoration is the wall of protection and coherence around the Christian household. Again, it may be worth noting symbolically the architectural unity of family dwelling places and the Jerusalem wall, the conspicuous pattern that many of the builders took responsibility for the portions adjoining or opposite their house (Nehemiah 3). This reminds us that one of the primary loci for the catechetical rebuilding discussed above must be family life. Study after study in recent years has demonstrated the unequalled influence of parents on the faith development of children. These surveys are simply confirming in our era's favorite language of data Luther's oft-quoted remarks in "The Estate of Marriage" (1522): "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal."⁷ In the congregation I serve, we encapsulate this wisdom in the form of Milestones Ministries' "Five Principles for Living and Passing on Faith," the third of which states, "Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too."⁸

While we should take courage from the contemporary resurgence of attention being given to nurturing faith in family life, mainline Protestants by and large continue to be in denial of how deeply interfaith marriage weakens the likelihood of religious transmission across generations. In the landmark four-generation study conducted by Vern Bengtson and associates and presented in the 2013 volume *Families and Faith*, the authors summarize:

In our sample, more than two-thirds of the same-faith marriages produced children who followed their parents' religious tradition, whereas *less than one in four* mixed marriages resulted in a child who followed

⁶ Quoted in Duckworth, *Wide Welcome*, 29; italics original.

⁷ LW 45:46.

⁸ See David W. Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church* (Minneapolis: Vibrant Faith Ministries, 2009) and milestonesministries.org.

either the mother or the father's religious tradition. Thus, we find that parents in a same-faith marriage are most likely to perpetuate religious continuity across generations. This is especially likely if there is a high religious commitment, the partners regularly attend religious services together, and religion is highly salient in the lives of both partners.⁹

Dishearteningly, in the premarriage counseling I have conducted in my first two ELCA calls using the Prepare/Enrich program, a general pattern is emerging that online dating services seem to be genuinely improving the levels of harmonization in couples—until we arrive at the “spiritual beliefs” section, when the scales tip rather drastically, and less communication appears to have taken place (in heterosexual couples, most typically it is the male partner who is unsure or indifferent to the statements in this category). The underlying sources for the low prevalence of shared faith among those—especially young adults—pursuing marriage are too complex to investigate here, although in my observation, a romantic myth narrated widely in the baby boomer generation that “true love transcends the superficial boundaries that used to divide in the old days” clearly continues to hold sway. This and the shortage of Christian men, although that is nothing new.¹⁰

In Nehemiah, once the returnees from exile have been reintroduced to God's law, they respond with a pledge of action that includes, in addition to Sabbath keeping and tithing, a refusal to “give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons” (Neh 10:30, 13:25). That the larger narrative celebrates the small number of most zealous males who extend this principle to the “sending away” of foreign wives and ethnically mixed children (Ezra 10) is abhorrent and quickly rejected as “violence” by the prophet Malachi (Mal 2:16).¹¹ One is tempted to distrust the Ezra-Nehemiah witness entirely as a consequence of this episode. Nevertheless, in our own day only those who still maintain a Christendom mindset, in which nearly everyone in the land is thought to be in the orbit of common faith by default, would dismiss wholesale the counsel offered here regarding marriage. Mainline Protestants in our context need to relinquish their all-too-casual attitude about the vitality of shared faith between marriage partners.

Restoring the walls of the Christian family as a distinct and—most critical for children—*coherent* ecclesial reality will mean investing more deliberately in tried-and-true spaces where single believing adults of faith can meet and bond,

⁹ Vern L. Bengtson with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127; italics added. The definition of *interfaith marriage* here includes marriages where one spouse professes a religious tradition while the other has none.

¹⁰ For sex ratios and the “oversupply of marriageable Christian women” in the early church, see Rodney Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” in *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).

¹¹ It is further rejected in the New Testament by Jesus in Mark 10:2–12 and by Paul, who had a plain opportunity to go down this road in 1 Corinthians 7 but instead, apparently accepting exogamous marriage as an ongoing reality, offered a mysterious note of hope on the vicarious quality of the believing partner's faith within the marital bond (1 Cor 7:14).

including campus and outdoor ministries, while not discounting the possibilities of virtual spaces. It will mean infusing youth ministry with mentors who can testify to and inculcate an endangered value. Where those who intend to marry do not share faith, it means encouraging more directly the adoption of a common religious practice early in marriage or, at the latest, at the onset of parenthood. As Bengtson's research indicates, once religious difference sets in as the norm, change is hard. Negotiations are reached that rest on the increased privatization of faith among family members, and not uncommonly a kind of negative evangelism draws the faith of the believing partner into dormancy. In sum, in marriages that include or desire a vocation of childrearing, the joint task of discipling children needs to rise to the fore, and the wisdom reflected by one of Bengtson's Jewish research subjects, Miriam Bernstein, heeded and translated to the greatest extent possible for churchly application:

My Jewishness is very important to me, and as far as my family is concerned and who my children would marry, Judaism would rank number one. Because I want to continue the tradition of being Jewish and I feel like our family and our history has gone through a lot in order to survive and be Jewish, [and] I don't want to give it up, I don't want to lose it. And so I would want my children to be married to someone who's Jewish and raise children who are Jewish. . . . Being Jewish is not simply a religion, being Jewish is a way of life.¹²

Third, let us return to the overarching theme of repentance in Nehemiah. If the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem is a physical enactment of Israel's postexile repentance, are we not challenged to look at ourselves and examine the state of repentance as a core element of our own proclamation? In my own ELCA context, signs abound that we are in a deteriorated state particularly unbecoming for a church body descended from Martin Luther.

Recall the first utterance of the budding Reformation, thesis 1 of the Ninety-Five Theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." This assertion reverberates through the response to question 4 in the Small Catechism's section on baptism, regarding the meaning of baptism for daily life: "It signifies that the old person in us with all its sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

This classic identity marker—the church as a people intimately acquainted with "sorrow for sin" and the mirror of the law that brings it about—lies in disrepair today due chiefly to the hermeneutic of affirmation we have absorbed from the culture around us. In synodical gatherings where the group exercise "describe who we are as the ELCA in a sentence" is conducted, the outcome has been consistent

¹² Bengtson, *Families and Faith*, 165.

and is now more than predictable: we are a church that accepts everyone, we are a church where all are welcome. The self-image is one of being a refuge for the rejected or oppressed, healing the wounds inflicted by an opposing, unjust force of intolerance and condemnation. On the one hand, we should be careful about too simplistically viewing these identities as being in direct conflict with one another. There is a place and a need for announcing what is in essence the good news of the First Article of the Creed and uplifting diversity as the Creator's delight. On the other hand, there is a real tension taking place here. Whereas the mark of repentance in the church distinguishes the community, illuminating the boundary between faith and unfaith, the mark of affirmation, which gives the thumbs-up to each "authentic self" in its midst, tends to merely mix us in with society's broad confederacy of the "woke." Moreover, for the old sinner, a preference for a proclamation of acceptance may not be entirely disinterested. As Ephraim Radner puts it: "The valorization of 'diversity' . . . can be seen as the most elaborated mask to . . . averted penitence."¹³

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The story of the returned exiles is the story of an Israel “pummeled into unity” giving expression to its covenanted identity through confession.¹⁴ “You have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly” (Neh 9:33b) prays Ezra, in what might be a good nutshell verse for restoring this practice in our own day. While we may not be able to pursue repentance as a project of our own making, as we look ahead to Lent, we will be wise to devote ourselves to that word of both law and gospel by which the Spirit evokes the turning we need—and restores around us a more truthful boundary: the church as a (yes, cross-national!) communion of forgiven sinners.

In many of our congregations today, one can find a running polemic against the idea of boundaries around the church: Jesus did not pay much heed to boundaries in his public ministry, therefore, neither should we. Sometimes the language of the church being a “centered set” rather than a “bounded set” is invoked—to the extent the community is oriented around Christ the center, preoccupation with the lines of insider/outsider should diminish. Sadly, these claims are often undermined by the lack of cohesiveness or strong ecclesial identity evidenced in the very faith communities in which they are made.

¹³ Bengtson, *Families and Faith*, 278.

¹⁴ Bengtson, *Families and Faith*, 281.

Nehemiah gives us more of a both/and. After the temple, the “house of God,” is restored (first!) at Jerusalem’s center, then also must come the walls. In the Pauline epistles, the church itself becomes the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 3:21–22)—a rather major detail necessarily omitted in Robert Jeffress’s “America First”-style Inauguration Day message. The figure of the walls then corresponds to the inspired labor of the saints to cherish, safeguard, and preserve the mystery that ties them together, no small theme in the New Testament.

The suggestions I have made for how to concentrate this labor in our contemporary context—lifelong catechesis, Christian family life, the restoration of repentance—should not be seen as a formula for a cloistered religious culture. Viewed in Lutheran terms, they do all pertain to the law and the law’s continuing role in the church. Too often we are given the picture that for the church to be a church of grace it must posit itself as a law-free zone. On the contrary, having some decently maintained walls points more clearly to the Gate, Jesus Christ (John 10). It is through Christ that the church goes out to engage the world without losing its distinctiveness. And it is through Christ that anyone may find entrance, transformed from unfaith to faith and from stranger to sibling. ⊕

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