**Sermon Script: Nehemiah 1 : ‘Orientation’**

We’re starting this new preaching series on the book of Nehemiah

* I hope there’s some mystery for you with this title screen
  + ‘The Time Is Now’ - says the series title
    - Time for what?
      * And why now?
* And what’s with that sofa - how would that fit with the story of Nehemiah?

The book tells of...

... one of the greatest revivals of the Old Testament

* It’s an exciting fast paced story and just 13 chapters long
* If you haven’t read it, you should

Three kinds of people were important in ancient Israel:

* Priests, prophets and Kings
* Nehemiah wasn’t any of those
  + He was a wine steward!
    - Yet he brought the kind of leadership that you see with Israel’s best Kings
* And he had real faith like an honest priest or prophet
* As a lay person, a man without titles...

...it’s a story about what someone like you could do when you really believe and put faith into action

And the sermon title today is ‘Orientation’

* At a time where everything was disoriented, out of whack for the people of God
* Nehemiah saw things as they really were
* He gets spiritually oriented

Now how well do we all know the events leading up to this story?

* Really well? A bit hazy? It’s all new to me?
* Well let’s be students of the Bible for a moment

Those who heard our Bible in five weeks series will at least remember that there was an Exile of the Jewish people in 586 BC

* Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem, and marches all the Jews off to Babylon
  + Jerusalem is completely destroyed - the temple, the walls round the city
  + It’s a ghost town, where just a few poor people scavenge for a living and the sound of jackals is heard at night
    - It seems like a full stop at the end of the grand history of the Jews

Which biblical stories happen during the Exile in Babylon?

* + Daniel, Esther, Ezekiel
* And then who is it who eventually leads the Jewish people back to Israel?
  + Zerubbabel
* He comes back to rebuild the Jerusalem temple, which he does despite lots of opposition

Then who brings a second lots of exiles home from Babylon?

* Ezra is a high priest and he’s more interested in people coming back to God than coming back to Jerusalem

So a whole lot has happened...

... before we even get to Nehemiah

* He’s like part three of the story of the return from Exile
* By the way - it’s really worth reading the book before Nehemiah which is the story of Zerubbabel and Ezra

In fact why don’t we go there now?

* Grab a bible and find the book of Ezra - it’s before Psalms - what page?
* Ch 1 - King Cyrus of Persia gets spoken to by God about rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple
* Ch 2 Zerubbabel gets sent to Jerusalem to do it
* There’s opposition to it in ch 4
* Then at ch 7 Ezra returns

So now you know the background and the stage is set

* Let’s go to Nehemiah ch 1 where Nehemiah is still in exile

Nehemiah 1 (NLT)

*1 These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.*

*In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.*

*3 They said to me, “Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”*

*4 When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. 5 Then I said,*

*“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! 7 We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.*

*8 “Please remember what you told your servant Moses: ‘If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. 9 But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.’*

*10 “The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. 11 O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.”*

*In those days I was the king’s cup-bearer.*

**Prayer**

I’m going to highlight the three things that happen in this passage...

... and then I’m going to say: So What?

**First thing that happens:**

Nehemiah asks ‘What is the state of God’s people?’

* The answer in v3, they are in great trouble and disgrace
* Despite all the work of Zerubbabel and things are still a mess
* The wall torn down; the gates destroyed by fire

The problem is, it’s not really safe to live there

* The city has no walls
* It has no dignity
  + It can’t defend itself; it can’t trade
    - It’s not allowed to rule itself - it’s under foreign rule

BUT THIS IS JERUSALEM!

* + The city of David, the city of Solomon
    - A place where people once came from far and wide to worship God
    - To celebrates feasts of Pentecost and Tabernacles

Now it’s a ruin

* You can’t even call it a city anymore
  + No-one there is proud of what they’ve become
  + If this is the people of God, then what a mockery they have become!
  + And it brings him to tears

But do you know what I love here?

* That Nehemiah even asked this question
  + Thousand of Jews had returned to Judah ahead of Nehemiah
    - *Did they bother to ask this same question?*
    - *Or didn’t they care?*
    - *Or did they believe that nothing could change their situation?*

But this one man Nehemiah, dares to ask the question

... and he expects a concrete answer

... and when he gets it, he doesn’t hide from it

You’ve got to wonder a little bit...

... about the spiritual temperature

... of those who had returned

* Did they have any faith?
  + Did they see God as a thing of the past?

**Second thing that happens:**

Nehemiah reflects on how it came to this

* And he knows because the prophets told them so many times
* ... that they were sent to exile because they were unfaithful to God
* If you want to be God’s people, make an effort to do what wants - it’s that simple

But he doesn’t *blame* the generation that caused the Exile

* He says, ‘***We*** have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned!’
* Because I guess he knows from personal experience...

... that when you shut God out of your life

... when you start to go your own way

... you’re removing yourself from the abundant life he wants to give you

... and we can still pretend that we are the people of God, but we’re not really

**Third thing that happens:**

Nehemiah responds with fasting, passionate prayer, and a plan to act

* For days ... he fasted
* And he prayed constantly - day and night
* What kind of prayer - desperate prayer
  + You can feel the urgent tone throughout the prayer in this chapter
  + It’s when you’re on your knees, because pretense and seemliness don’t matter any more

And again...

... you wonder about the spiritual temperature of those back in Judah

* Were any of them fasting?
* Were they desperate?
* Were they praying day and night?

Ah this all a bit intense isn’t it?

* Rather just sit on the couch
* Confessing sin?; praying day and night?
* How long is anyone going to keep all that up?

And it is true

* This is a really intense moment in Israel’s history
* And God chose for that moment, not a priest, or a prophet or a king

... but a wine steward

Because this wine steward, this layman, Nehemiah ...

... had a spiritual, not a worldly orientation

* He was a man who felt things
* A man of faith and resolve

So what then?

* What’s the application for us?
* Well strange as it may seem I have three questions for us
* The same three
  + So let’s take out their answers and put in ours

What today, is the state of God’s people, here in New Zealand?

* I don’t know what you think, but I think it’s a mess
* To be sure God is still doing amazing things, and many churches and individuals are doing amazing Christlike things
* Amy’s event and many other great things from last year are examples of that
  + But the state of Christianity in NZ is a mess

And I don’t really know where to start

* I think NZ christianity is luke warm
  + I think the spiritual temperature is pretty low
* There’s a casual mention in this passage that Nehemiah fasted for days
  + How many christians fast these days?
  + It just feels like the ultimate inconvenience!

And desperate prayer, day and night...

* How much of that is there amongst NZ christians
  + Some churches call a prayer meeting and have to call it off for lack of numbers

And what do we look like to the secular world?

* I think some see us as a mockery
* The media doesn’t help us I guess
  + But we look to many, like a society of people who hate homosexuals
    - And who have a black and white view of the world, inspired by an ancient and irrelevant book called the Bible

But the funny thing about that is...

* I so often find that Christians haven’t even thought biblically about today’s big topical issues
  + And things like homosexuality and gender equality or things like living together vs marriage, are great examples
    - Many christians I meet have strong views about these things but don’t even know where to look in the Bible to defend their position
      * The skill of debating a topic with reference to Scripture - I’m wondering if many people can do that any more?

I could go on...

... but I’d rather you talked about it in your life groups

* Do you agree that the state of Christianity in NZ is a mess - just like in the story of Nehemiah
  + And if so, why?

And then secondly you could reflect on how things became that way

* Is it the media’s fault?
  + Is it the internet’s fault - riddled as it is with pornography?
    - Is it the government’s fault? Or Hillary Clinton’s?

It seems that a lot of Christians in the US...

... feel that if only we could have a conservative government for a decent period it’d set things right again

* + But is that really the answer?
* Or is it more that many Christians just really like the materialistic way of life that society offers

... and we’ve lost our passion for God?

* + We don’t have time to read the Bible for 15 minutes a day
    - But we can’t wait to binge-watch another series on Netflix
      * How many hours can we fritter away doing that?

I look in the news these days...

... and I think to myself: *I really don’t want to go the Donald Trump way*

* *And I don’t want to go the Hillary Clinton way*
  + I want to go the Jesus way

I think about how we are all full of the latest thing Donald Trump said

* But scarcely mention in public, the things Jesus said - we’re too scared!

How did things become this way in NZ Christianity?

* How did it end up such a mess?
  + I don’t know

I think back to what our forebears hoped for this country

* In the 1870’s a NZer called Thomas Bracken wrote this:

*Let our love for Thee increase,*

*May Thy blessings never cease,*

*Men of every creed and race,*

*Gather here before Thy face,*

* Does anyone recognise it?
* It’s from our national anthem
  + People agreed to make those words into our national anthem!

Wow! What a vision for NZ!

* A place where people love God!
  + *Where people of all races live harmoniously*
  + *What a vision!*
* But what’s happened to that vision?
  + How did we end up so far from that?
  + Are we prepared to ask that question? Like Nehemiah did?

Do we have the faith to believe things could be different to what they are?

* Would it need Jesus himself to return in order to achieve it?
  + Or could it all start with a simple layman, a wine steward? Like you?

And so Nehemiah responds to the mess the people of God are in...

... with fasting, desperate prayer and a plan to act

* How do you respond?
* What if in our life time, we were to see the NZ that Thomas Bracken hoped for when he wrote the national anthem?
  + A country of people who love and worship God?
* What if, on Waitangi Day - an important day - we could all be celebrating racial harmony up and down our country, just like in the words of the anthem?

How much do we want God to be known in Aotearoa?

* Do we really want God at work in our lives, raising the spiritual temperature
  + Or does that seem all a bit intense
  + And we’d rather sit on the couch?
* Do we want a materialistic way of life (like society) more than we want God?

I want to leave you with the central challenge I find in the book of Nehemiah:



There’s a time that the church in NZ ...

... will need to collectively get off the couch

* + - If you ask me the time is now

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Help us rediscover the ancient paths

**E Ihoa Atua,**

**O ngā iwi mātou rā,**

**āta whakarongona;**

**Me aroha noa.**

**Kia hua ko te pai;**

**Kia tau tō atawhai;**

**Manaakitia mai**

**Aotearoa.**