



## MEANT FOR THE MESS

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Federal Way, WA  
September 13, 2009*

For all you parents who are concerned about the risks your kids take when they go skateboarding, there's now a new danger to worry about: Bears.

At least that's true in Snowmass, a little resort town in Colorado. Just a couple weeks ago, residents went out one Tuesday morning and discovered a big brown bear that had wandered in overnight and gotten stuck down in the sunken skateboard park. The curved concrete walls were just too slick and steep for bear claws to get a grip. And there he sat.

So check this out: rescuers came along and lowered a ladder down into the pit. The bear figured out what it was, then proceeded to climb the ladder to safety, rung by rung, just like a person would. Then he just lumbered back into the woods, probably to be scolded by his mother for not wearing a helmet at the skate park.

Now I know you're wondering what a bear and skateboarding have to do with my sermon, and the answer is nothing. What caught my eye was the ladder. It's just a 16 foot utility ladder – probably the least interesting piece of the whole story. But without the ladder, there would be no rescue. It became the way out, and even the bear knew what to do with it.

I like to think that we've been climbing a ladder together over the past few months. Let's look back for a minute and think about where we've come from. This year started off with a number of people in our congregation being hit by all kinds of hurt – grief. Health issues. Financial difficulties. It seemed like we entered this intense season of hardship, with more waves of sorrow rolling in than normal. So we stopped and took stock, bringing our pain before the Lord in prayer as a congregation.

Out of that, we spent some time with the prophet Habakkuk, a man who asked God all the difficult “why” questions. Why is there suffering? Why are you allowing me to go through this? And we saw Habakkuk come to the conclusion that although he couldn't know all the answers, he did know and trust God's character, and that God was God and he wasn't, and he could still praise him.

From Habakkuk, we moved into a summer study about owning our own stories and what it looks like to move from brokenness to wholeness. We looked at being transparent and

real with our own issues, and what it means to honestly address our struggles. And then we turned to Philippians, envisioning what it looks like to live out that transparency in community.

I see these all as steps in a ladder. The ladder is nothing fancy or new – just God’s word giving us sure footholds to climb from the depths up to solid ground.

**Psalm 40:1-3**

*I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he turned to me and heard my cry.  
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
out of the mud and mire;  
he set my feet on a rock  
and gave me a firm place to stand.  
He put a new song in my mouth,  
a hymn of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear  
and put their trust in the LORD.*

That is the goal: To be at a place where our lives point other people to God. His rescue of us from the skateboard bowl of life not only saves us – it becomes an encouragement to other people needing rescue.

So we’ve been on a journey this year, collectively climbing this ladder to rise above the sorrow and pain and hardship . Now as we go into fall, we’re moving to the next rung. This one takes us to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. If you haven’t read it before, it’s a terrific tale of courage, leadership, commitment and vision. But what I appreciate most about this book is that it is entirely about rebuilding and restoration. It’s about second chances and fresh starts and making a difference. It’s the story of a man who saw a need that was bigger and beyond his own world and how God worked through him to do great things.

Over the next few weeks, I want to take you on a walk with Nehemiah as his adventure unfolds. Because I believe with my whole heart that this man from 2,500 years ago has a very contemporary message to share with us. He challenges us to ask, “What is God wanting to build here, and where do I fit into that?”

If we allow it to, I think this book can lead us on a journey of discovery of what God is calling us to, both individually and as a community.

**Nehemiah 1**

*The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:*

*In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.*

To understand Nehemiah's story, we need to know just a little bit of ancient world history. Nehemiah was Jewish, but he lived in a period of time when the Israelites had no official country of their own anymore. David's kingdom had split into two: Ten of the tribes formed one territory called Israel and the other two tribes became Judah. Israel, the northern part, was conquered in 722 BC by the Assyrians, and the people were taken into captivity. Then the Babylonian Empire came to power, and by 586 BC they expanded west and gobbled up Judah and its capitol city of Jerusalem. When they did that, they deported thousands and thousands the people of Judah, taking them with them back to Babylon, where they lived in exile. This is all recorded not just in the Bible but also in Babylonian history. You can go to the British Museum and see this cuneiform tablet from Babylonia that talks about Nebuchadnezzar's conquering of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah lived and wrote about 140 years after the deportation. He still considered Judah to be the homeland, but his world was Persian through and through. In fact, he was engrained enough in the culture to be a high official in the king's court.

He begins his book writing from the king's winter palace, which was even further from Jerusalem than Babylon, in the city of Susa. In our frame of reference, it would be about the distance NE Tacoma is from Fresno. Only hours of traveling by car, but months by camel. There is a great geographical separation between Nehemiah and whatever is happening back in Jerusalem. So Nehemiah's brother and these other men came to give him an update.

*They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

*When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.*

I heard a story on the radio this week about the New Zealand black robin. It only lives on a few small islands and the bird was on the very brink of extinction. In fact there were only 5 birds left in the world, and of those five, there was only one female and one male that could even breed. So the entire species hinged on two birds. A scientist named Donald Merton carefully captured the robins and began breeding them in captivity to restore the population. All his colleagues laughed at him and said it wouldn't work, but he did it. Today there are more than 250 of the robins and they are thriving once again.

The exiles who had returned to Jerusalem represented a people on the verge of extinction. If something didn't change soon, the Israelites would simply be absorbed into their surrounding cultures. That's what happens over time. But some of the Jews had been allowed to return from Babylon, creating this spark of hope for all the Jews in exile. They have this new chance to start over, to rebuild the city. It felt like God was once again smiling on them, and that maybe – just maybe – a miracle would happen.

Symbolically, Jerusalem represented more than just the capitol city. It was also the heart of Israel's faith. That was where God had chosen to put his name. That was where the Temple was. That was where worship was supposed to happen.

So when Jerusalem is broken down and a shambles, it signals a deeper tear in the relationship with God. The outward signs of his approval and presence are gone.

Nehemiah heard these things and he sat down and wept. You know, part of my family hails from Scotland. Like Nehemiah, they probably left there at least 140 years ago. So if something bad happened to somebody in Scotland, I would feel sad for them, but I probably wouldn't sit down and cry about it. It's not that I'm cold-hearted – there's just no longer any personal connection to anyone there, and it feels very far away.

You have to wonder if Nehemiah himself was surprised by the intensity of his emotions at this news. He was far enough removed from the situation that you wouldn't think he'd be so affected by it. The king makes a comment later that he had never seen Nehemiah sad before, so it must have been somewhat out of character for him. And it was a feeling that didn't go away. For months he was torn up by what he had heard.

What was going on? We'll see as we go on that this was more than just ordinary sorrow. This was God taking the broken wall in Jerusalem to cause a broken heart Nehemiah. That's where the work was going on. The problems "over there" became Nehemiah's problem "over here." He connected and resonated with it as if it were happening to him.

As God invites us to join him in his work, one of the things we find is that **we're called to make it personal**. Nehemiah could easily have heard the news about Jerusalem and said, "Wow. That's really too bad for them. I feel awful. Where do you guys want to go to dinner?" It's easy to disconnect information from responsibility. But when we view the problem as being ours, then we are compelled to action.

Dean Owen gave me a copy of Rich Stearns' new book, "The Hole in Our Gospel." Rich Stearns is the president of World Vision. The story of how he became president is fascinating in itself. He was the CEO of Lennox China, one of the most prestigious companies in the U.S., taking home a fat salary and catering to the richest clientele. God used a whole series of remarkable and specific interventions to dislodge him from his luxury job and turn him into an advocate for the poorest of the poor.

But he did not want to take the job, and he was viewing it as this major personal sacrifice. Until he took his first trip in his new post, travelling to Rakai, Uganda. There he met a 13 year old boy who shared the same name as him: Richard. Richard was an AIDS orphan trying to raise his two younger brothers in a shack with no electricity or water or even beds. And he's just one of 12 million AIDS orphans in Africa.

Rich Stearns asked if he had a Bible, and he ran to the other room to get it. Then Rich asked him, "Can you read it?" and Richard said, "I love to read the book of John, because it says that Jesus loves the children."

And Richard Stearns wrote, “This overwhelmed me and my tears started to flow. Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. I didn’t know. But I did know. I knew about poverty and suffering in the world, but I kept these things outside of my insulating bubble and looked the other way. Yet this was to be the moment that would ever after define me. Rakai was what God wanted me to see.”

He realized that day that he could no longer separate himself from the problems of the poor. It was another World Vision president, Bob Pierce, who said, “Let my heart be broken by what breaks the heart of God.”

What breaks your heart, today? Maybe God has more intended for you with that than sadness. Maybe he is inviting you into the mess. God uses our emotions to grab our attention and shape how we envision ourselves.

I got convicted about this myself this week, because it reminded me of a family I know outside our congregation who is in a terrible spot financially. God has continued to put them on my heart, and I felt like he was saying to me, “Well? What are you going to do with that feeling? Are you listening to your own sermon this week?”

Not all of us can be in as widely influential of a job as Rich Stearns, but all of us can learn to be sensitive to when God is talking to us through our hearts. Our calling from him will grow out of where we personally connect with the need in the world.

Given Nehemiah’s strong feelings on the subject, you might think he would jump up right away and head for Jerusalem. But he didn’t.

*For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:*

*"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*

*"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'*

*"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."*

*I was cupbearer to the king.*

Instead of rushing out the door to help, Nehemiah dropped to his knees and began to pray. I love it that as urgent as the need was, he didn't forget what was most important.

No matter what we may think God is asking us to do, we can't lose sight of what our true calling is: **We're called to press close to God.**

Martin Luther was the great theologian of the Reformation back in the 1500s. He had a huge passion for bringing change in the church, and God had broken his heart with the sin he saw twisting Christianity into something ugly. Hypocrisy and corruption all through the leadership. Selling forgiveness to people for money. It was a desperate time and the need was great. Any time an individual tries to take on a power structure, it can be overwhelming.

So Luther is deeply engaged in this crisis. One evening, someone asked him what his plans were for the next day. He said, "Work, work, work -- from early till late. In fact I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

Although God wants our hearts to be broken and he's calling us to action, it is not to save or even change the world. That's his job, and he can accomplish that with or without us. He calls us to join him not because he needs our help but because he wants us to pull up alongside him.

Author Michael Gurian wrote a book called *The Wonder of Boys*, which is all about parenting and mentoring boys. In it, he talks about the concept of "parallel play". He says, "Males of all ages tend to relate most comfortably when playing a game or doing a project together, working side by side."

He tells the story of a single mom who was having difficulty communicating with her eleven year old son, who had become sullen and preoccupied. She couldn't get him to talk about it. On advice of a counselor, she decided to get him into running, which she enjoyed doing every morning. As the two of them ran side by side, he became more talkative and their relationship grew. The running was a means to a relationship.

As the ultimate parent, God knows that the work he calls us to is not in the end about the work itself – it's about developing the relationship he has with us. As we work shoulder to shoulder with him, so to speak, involving ourselves in what he most cares about, we grow in our understanding and appreciation of who God is.

Nehemiah prayed. And he prayed. And he prayed some more. His prayer had all the elements of that classic PRAY acronym: Praise, Repentance, Asking and Yielding.

But he didn't just approach it like a checklist of things to get out of the way. He took his time. Nehemiah says it was "some days" that he fasted and prayed, but by the end of his

prayer, when he goes to talk to the king, four months have passed. He did not rush his time of seeking God's face.

This is the classic struggle of being versus doing. I get antsy to move forward on my plans. Once I have an idea in my head I don't particularly like being patient. But waiting on God can't be rushed. It is the time spent in his presence that shaped everything Nehemiah did from that point forward. That's true for us as well.

By the end of his prayer time, Nehemiah seems to be getting some clarity as to what he should do, because he ends with this request to God:

*Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.*

If someone hasn't read any further into the book, you have no idea who Nehemiah is talking about. What man? It's a great bit of writing there that generates curiosity as to where he is going. Then he reveals his secret in the next line:

*I was cupbearer to the king.*

This is a bolt from the blue. Nobody's even been thinking about who Nehemiah is or his role in society. All the attention is on the problem. But Nehemiah himself is processing all this information through the filter of his position and personality. And it was no accident that God chose to put this particular burden on his heart, because Nehemiah was uniquely and strategically positioned to do something about it.

I think another piece to our calling is that **we're called to know who we are**. We overlook large chunks of our make-up and dismiss it as not being of any use to God. We tend to think of his calling on us as being something that will be separate from our daily existence.

Nehemiah could have said, "You know I'm not really the right candidate to help God here. I'm no priest like Ezra. I'm a civil servant. I'm not even royalty like Zerubbabel. I have a bureaucrat's job in a pretty pagan environment. God couldn't possibly use my profession as part of his plan."

Gaining a sense of God's call is not to catch a vision for some foreign land doing some spiritual task – it comes from re-imagining what we are doing here and now, to see that our placement right now is an appointment by God. He can combine the passion he puts in our heart with the exact spot he has placed us in to accomplish something spectacular.

In his book, "Doing Church as a Team," Wayne Cordeiro writes,

*Do you believe that God loves policemen? I do. Do you believe that He loves teachers? Me, too. What about construction workers? Absolutely! And if He truly does love them and wants to reach them with the gospel, then what would be the very best way to do that? Through a pastor? Possibly, but that may not be the most ideal. People at your*

*office or school may be quite intimidated and even put off if a pastor walked into the lunchroom and began preaching.*

*What's the best way to reach teachers? It seems to me the best way would be through another teacher. So what does God do? He takes full-time ministers and disguises them as teachers! He takes saints like you and me, and He gives them gifts and a passion to be the best teacher they can be. Then He sends them into the school system where they can reach other educators with God's love.*

*How does God reach police officers? He takes full-time ministers and disguises them as police officers. He gives them the necessary gifts, passions, and credentials, and assigns them to police departments all over the nation.*

*God's full-time ministers are everywhere! We are all ambassadors. We are all ministers. Each one of us is called to represent Him in the world.*

Before you let this put you off by saying “Wait a minute. I’m no Billy Graham. Or Paul.” Let me remind you that that’s the whole point. God wants you for you. When we shift our focus to what we’re afraid he’ll ask of us, we become immobilized. But as the saying goes, where God guides, God provides. He never asks us to do something we’re incapable of. As Oswald Chambers puts it, “When we choose deliberately to obey him, then he will tax the remotest star and the last grain of sand to assist us with his almighty power.”

He knows your job. He knows your skills. He knows your personality type. He knows what makes you cringe and what turns your crank. He made you that way. And he knows there are things you can do that nobody else can.

Do you know who you are? Do you truly believe that God also knows who you are and that his plan for you starts right there?

Nehemiah understood that his job afforded him a rare opportunity. As cupbearer to the king, he tasted the wine given the king to be sure it wasn’t poisoned. So he had the king’s complete trust. Not only that, historians say cupbearers had such close access to the king that they wielded a great amount of influence in policy decisions. They sometimes functioned more like a chief of staff than a wine steward.

It was an incredible place of power. When you stop to think about it, it was a pretty sweet gig, assuming you didn’t drink something dangerous. Nehemiah enjoyed influence, wealth, safety, security, family. And it would have been easy for him to say, “See? God can use me here. I can keep talking to the king and help him make decisions that will benefit our people. You’re better served with me here.”

But all the perks and benefits weren’t enough to keep him from following what he knew in his heart was the right thing to do. God wanted him on site with his people in Jerusalem. He was meant for the mess.

Part of any calling from God is the recognition that **we're called to leave the comfort zone**. We're meant for the mess. We might think a true calling from God will feel so good because it's tailored to us. That shouldn't pinch at all, right? But someone once said, "Christianity isn't about self-fulfillment. It's about self-denial."

You might think, well how does this fit with the last point about God knowing who we are and working with that? Doesn't that mean I can operate within my comfort zone?

It's not about abandoning who you are – it's about taking who you are to a new level. Athletes never improve if they don't push themselves past what they currently can do. They don't complain when their coaches challenge them, because they know that's how they'll grow. Actors will talk about how they take different roles so they don't get stereotyped as one type of character they've played well before. The greatest ones bring something of themselves to each part and yet are stretched at the same time.

Are you becoming a stereotype in your faith, playing the same character? God takes our essential self, all that makes us who we are, and he asks us to be willing to be pushed and stretched beyond where we would normally be most comfortable. It's in doing that that we grow. We're meant for the mess – not to just live safely in what we already know and feel good about.

I've said it many times before, but this is the way because this is the way Jesus lived. He stepped outside his comfort zone to come and rescue us, to say the least. We're called to pick up our cross and follow him. And for a follower of Jesus, the road always leads to Calvary.

It sounds horrible and scary when you take it out of context. Who would willingly choose to uncomfortable? But that's missing the point that obedience has its own rewards. And when it grows out of the process we've been talking about this morning, you can't help but know that it's the right thing to do.

As Will Rogers put it in one of my favorite quotes, "Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is."

That's the question this morning: Why not? God is calling each one of us. There is world of need and hurt right at our doorstep. It's a messy place. But we were meant for the mess. God has uniquely qualified us and placed us to accomplish his purposes. So why not? Why not say yes to him? What's been holding me back? Those small groups you dismissed right away – why not think about joining one? Why not ask for help that you know you need?

Why not pray about New Day and what God would have us do? What if like Nehemiah we took the next few months to seek God's will for our church in 2010? I have no ambition to build a building or big splashy programs. But I would love to be part of a church that is pressing close to God and catching his heart for the needs of the world around us. Who knows what he might be asking of us that New Day is uniquely

positioned to do? It's going out on a limb to listen for what that might be. But there's fruit there. And it's waiting for us.