

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
by the Rev. Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD
Shared by: Jim Eles

“When the Bottom Falls Out – What Then?”

12th in the Nehemiah Series
November 20, 2022
169th Anniversary

Video clip Maya Angelou “Still I Rise”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N74aTez08II>
Nehemiah 9:1-22

Can you remember when you were a child? Can you remember back when you were 8, 9 or 10 years old? I remember that during that time of life I was looking to do basically one thing – to grow up. I remember looking to the future with longing. I didn't appreciate where I was in life. I was always looking for my next major birthday! When I was ten I wanted to be 13, then 16, then 18, then 21, and then 25. Each date marked a milestone of maturity. Then came the moment that we all face when I stopped looking forward and started saying as George Burns had said,

I wish I was 18 again
And going where I've never been
But old folks and old oaks standing tall
Just pretend
But I wish I was 18 again

While enjoying an early morning breakfast in a northern Arizona cafe, four elderly ranchers were discussing everything from cattle, horses, and weather, to how things used to be in the "good old days." Eventually the conversation moved on to their spouses. One gentleman turned to the fellow on his right and asked, "Roy, aren't you and your bride celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary soon?" "Yup, we sure are," Roy replied. "Well, are you gonna do anything special to celebrate?" another man asked. The old gentleman pondered this for a moment, then replied, "For our twenty-fifth anniversary, I took Bea to Tucson. Maybe for our fiftieth, I'll go down there and get her."

Anniversaries, like birthdays, are important not only because they mark a point in time; but because they allow us to pause and reflect on how far we have come. And whether or not we are where we hoped to be at this point in time, and how far we have yet to go.

Stouffville United Church has reached 169 years of service to God and this community. It is an important that we mark this time.

As we to turn to Nehemiah 9, we hear what could be one of the longest prayers recorded in the bible. They have finished the wall, come through the worse period in memory and now, are at that point of personal reflection that always comes if one has experienced the bottom fall out and are left with the question. What then? What do I do know? Nehemiah was helping them rebuild their lives. So what do you do when the bottom drops out?

I

Nehemiah called for his people to **Come Clean**. What would you do if you knew you had only one more year to live.” Would there be any changes in your life?

There is a story about three men who went to heaven and in the course of their conversation the question was asked, “What do you want people to say about you at your funeral?” One man said, “Well, I would want people to say that I was a doctor that made a difference in people’s lives. That I dedicated my life to helping people.” The next man said, Well, I just want to people to say “he was a good husband and father, devoted to his family.” And the third man said after think about it, “Well, I’d like someone to say, “Hey, look he’s moving.”

We all want that second chance. Before the celebration, there is the cleansing. Before the cleansing is the conviction. Nehemiah 9 is a careful record of what happened at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). “.... *the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them....*”

They were acknowledging the need to face up to their state of affairs. Acknowledging their part in it. They weren’t trying to make their situation out to be anything better than it was. Too often we show the world a picture of our lives--like the picture on a child’s jigsaw puzzle box. The picture on the front displays a scene of order and completion--yet, within we know it is just a mass of pieces without any semblance of order. We need to stop dealing in denial and start dealing in the truth. We need our Lord to cleanse us even, as He cleansed the first temple. And to do that we need to stop faking it and start facing the man in the mirror.

A friend once invited me to go with him to an open A.A. meeting. Having never gone to one before, I thought it was an honor to be asked to go with him. Do you know what I was struck by at that meeting? I was struck by their honesty. Before anyone was allowed to speak that person had to introduce themselves like this--they said, “Hi, I’m George and I’m and Alcoholic”. Or, “Hi, I’m Betty and I’m an Alcoholic.” And some told their stories about how they realized that their lives were unmanageable and that they had to turn their lives over to a power greater then themselves. And how they did fearless moral inventories and made amends to those they had harm. This spiritual program that began out of the Oxford Christian movement changed lives because dealt in truth not lies.

What would happen if we did the same? What would happen if we said, Hi, I’m John and I’m a sinner? For I am and so are you. It is clear enough in scripture if it isn’t in our lives that we are. Why don’t we just face it, and then we can let Him deal with it.

II

Nehemiah called for his people to Come Clean and **Come Close**. *The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God*

There are many things that happen to us in life. Some of those things are the result of our own making –good and bad. Others are done to us that are outside our control. But what is in our control is how we respond to what happens to us. We can live in regret or redeem the situation. We can become bitter or be made better because of the situation.

There was once a man driving along the road and he was involved in an accident with another car towing a horse trailer. A few months later he tried to claim damages for his injuries, but the insurance company lawyer questioned his claim.

"How can you now claim to have all these injuries?" he was asked. "According to the police report, at the time you said you were not hurt."

"Well it's like this," said the man. "I was lying in the road in a lot of pain, and I heard someone say the horse had a broken leg. The next thing I know the police officer pulled out his gun and shot the horse. Then someone came and asked me, "Are you okay?"

In a Nike advertisement some years ago, a voice came over the television saying, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." Those words were spoken by Michael Jordan, by most standards the greatest basketball player ever to play the game.

Maya Angelou who passed away at the age of 86 on May 28th 2014 was lauded as a multifaceted superstar – tall spirited individualist feminist writer, African American poet, singer, actor and storyteller embodied one who overcame and redeemed a past that is rarely spoken of where once she had been a madam and sometime prostitute at a San Diego brothel. This literary giant showed us all how to rise.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust I'll rise.

I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Why are Maya Angelou, Michal Jordon and others considered great? It was because they didn't let their past define them. Nor did they deny it. They didn't waste time in regret they redeemed it. They learned and benefited from it.

In Nehemiah we are reminded of a time when things were not that great and yet God never forgot his people; he brought Abram out of Ur and gave him a new name and a new start. And the message to us is He can do the same for you and me.

III

Nehemiah called for his people to Come Clean and Come Close. And finally **Come Celebrate** (9:4,5). The worship leaders (Levites) cried out to God in prayer (4)! They called to the people to stand up and bless the Lord and lift up His name (5)! , *“Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise!*

Nehemiah reminds us that there are times, especially after great trials, that we need to remember to celebrate and give thanks to God for all that we have come through, and all that God is preparing us for in the future.

A while ago after dinner we had with some friends, we sent our children to get changed for bed. After a while, one of my children came to the top of the stairs and shouted to everyone present. “I’m about ready to say my prayers. Does anyone want anything?” Such simple faith comes from an unpretentiousness. It comes from being real about ourselves and our needs. Unless we get real -come clean and close to God - we will never be able to receive and celebrate.

When the Space shuttle challenger exploded and everyone died. There was some controversy over what were the last words said on board. In the flight recorder, the official statement said, all they heard was the statement, "OH OH". However, since then, it has said, that there was one voice on the recorder. And it was of the female astronaut saying, "Please, hold my hand."

Life can be hard. We need to hold one another.

It is said that the three things that people need to hear in life to make them feel secure are

"I love you"

"I forgive you"

"Come for supper"

And this is what our Lord has always said, and what our Lord has commissioned us to say on His behalf. "I love you, I forgive you, come for supper."

You think about that. Amen.

