

The God of How

Nehemiah 2:1-10

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²In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served to him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. ²So the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.' Then I was very much afraid. ³I said to the king, 'May the king live for ever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' ⁴Then the king said to me, 'What do you request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵Then I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it.' ⁶The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), 'How long will you be gone, and when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. ⁷Then I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; ⁸and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.' And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

⁹ Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. ¹⁰When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

Back in 1907, Boston attorney Lawrence Luellen had an idea. It seems that in Luellen's day, things were not as sanitary as they are today. A little over 100 years ago, when it was a hot day like today, people would seek a cool drink of water from large water containers located in public buildings, railway stations, and schools. However, these water containers weren't like water fountains or soda machines. Instead, to get water from these containers, hundreds of different people would often share a communal metal drinking cup known as a tin dipper. As one biologist, studying the use of these common drinking cups in the public schools of Easton, Pennsylvania, wrote, there was "death in [those] school drinking cups."

Thinking he could improve hygienic conditions, Luellen created a new kind of cup. Instead of being made of glass or metal – the norm at the time, Luellen’s cup was made of paper. He called it the *Health Kup*. However, when Luellen and his cofounder Hugh Moore went to market with their paper cups, there wasn’t much interest. Apparently, it was hard to sell a solution to a problem people didn’t know they had.

For ten years, Luellen and Moore’s *Health Kup* only achieved moderate growth for 10 years. But then something happened...

In 1918, the outbreak of the Spanish Flu suddenly shot Luellen and Moore’s cups to popularity. Suddenly, drinking out of a disposable cup became a matter of life and death. In response, Luellen and Moore launched an advertising campaign focused on awareness:

“No matter how clean it may look, the soda glass is common carrier of disease. Uncounted lips touch it. Uncounted germs cluster and breed on its rim – the germs of influenza, pneumonia, diphtheria, and worse.”

As awareness of the health risks grew, states began to ban the use of “tin dippers,” making Luellen and Moore’s cups even more popular. And as the epidemic roared on, so did their sales. Soon, competitors arrived on the market and Luellen and Moore needed to differentiate their *Health Kups* from the rest of the competition. Borrowing a name from a doll company, the *Health Kups* were renamed Dixie Cups. By 1935, they were making over 3 billion of these cups annually.

The success of Dixie cups also made them a pioneering product for other single-use products. Soon Kleenex, paper towels, razors, aerosol cans, and more followed in the footsteps of the Dixie cup.ⁱ

The story of the Dixie cup is proof of the old adage, *timing is everything*. When it was first invented, the timing wasn’t right for the Dixie cup. But, when just the right set of circumstances arose, the Dixie cup was an idea whose time had come.

All of us know how important timing is. Perhaps you got your job because you were in the right place at the right time. Maybe you met your spouse because you showed up to class at the same time she did. Perhaps, after years of trying, everything lined up for you to become a new parent. Whether it is a job, a family, a new product, or the avoidance of a car wreck, *timing is everything*.

That same adage could also be applied to our scripture lesson. Three weeks ago, Josh introduced us to Nehemiah – one of the key figures in our summer worship series, *The Return*. As we learned from his first-person memoir – the Old Testament book of Nehemiah – Nehemiah had a burden; a concern. A brother and some fellow travelers stopped in to visit Nehemiah. As they chatted, Nehemiah asked how things were going with the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. Just to give you some perspective, this was almost 100 years after Zerubbabel and Jeshua led the first 50,000 exiles back to Jerusalem (our scripture two weeks ago) and about 14 years after Ezra led a similar return of 5,000 exiles (our scripture last week). Well, even though the exiles had been in Jerusalem for quite some time, things still weren't in order. As Nehemiah's brother and fellow travelers told him, "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." (1:3)

As Josh pointed out, Nehemiah's response to that news wasn't to shrug his shoulders and say, "that's too bad." After all, it had been 150 years since King Nebuchadnezzar had torn down the walls of Jerusalem. This wasn't exactly *front page, above the fold* news. Yet, this report weighed heavily upon him. He sat down and wept. For days he mourned. For days he fasted. For days he prayed. And finally, he prayed:

"God, remember your people, Israel. I know we haven't always kept up our end of the bargain. You did just what you said you would do, scattering us among the nations for our unfaithfulness. But, God, you also said that if we return to you, you would gather us to a place you chose as a dwelling. So, God, these are your people

– the people you have redeemed. And I am one of them. Therefore, will you provide me with one little favor?” (1:5-11 paraphrased)

What Nehemiah prayed is that God might give him the opportunity to go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He didn't pray that the wall would somehow be rebuilt. He prayed that he might do it. That's what made Nehemiah a visionary, not a dreamer. While a dreamer dreams about things being different, a visionary envisions himself or herself making a difference. Nehemiah was a visionary. He was looking for an opportunity to do something...to make a difference.ⁱⁱ

After praying this, Nehemiah waited. Not quite what you expect a visionary to do. When you think of someone who has a burden and a plan for addressing that burden, our tendency is to think that immediate action is required. We think Nehemiah should have snuck away in the dead of night and headed to Jerusalem in a self-propelled frenzy of activity. But Nehemiah waited...just like those who came before him. The Bible tells us that Joseph spent years in an Egyptian dungeon waiting for his time to come. Moses waited 40 years for the opportunity to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David, the teenage king, spent years hiding in caves before he finally fulfilled his royal calling. Like them, Nehemiah had a vision, but the timing wasn't quite right. His vision was still being matured in him. And so he waited.

But as Nehemiah waited, he didn't just sit around twiddling his thumbs. His waiting time was not wasted time. Instead, he prepared. He used the downtime to pray and to plan. He prayed over-and-over that he wouldn't miss the opportunity when God provided it. And he planned what he would do to pursue his vision. When God granted him the opportunity to cast his vision before the king, Nehemiah would be ready and prepared.

While Joseph, Moses, and David all had to wait many years to advance their vision, Nehemiah only had to wait about four months. Just four months after Nehemiah's

brother had informed him about Jerusalem, planting a vision inside him that was ready to erupt, Nehemiah got his opportunity. It turns out, King Artaxerxes decided to throw a party.

It wasn't unusual for a Persian king to hold a banquet. Nehemiah, as you might remember, was the cupbearer to the king. This was a position of great trust because the cupbearer was in charge of making sure the wine that the king drank was not poisoned. Obviously, King Artaxerxes trusted Nehemiah. And that made him a pretty important figure at a banquet where the wine would be flowing. Perhaps, Nehemiah thought, the fact that I'm a trusted servant might help. After all, on some occasions as opulent banquets like this, the king grants special requests to those in attendance. Maybe I can use this to my benefit.

So as the banquet continued, Nehemiah brought wine to the king. But, unlike all the other times he had served the king, this time, he conducted himself as in deep mourning. He knew that acting morose in the king's presence might make people suspicious. In fact he might have been thrown out of the throne room or even killed for expressing anything other than delight in the king's presence. For this reason and countless others, Nehemiah was afraid (2:2). But, he decided to take a chance realizing that the welfare of Jerusalem depended on his skill.

Fortunately, the king saw what Nehemiah intended him to see. "Why is your face so sad, since you are not sick?" Mustering up all the courage he could, Nehemiah wished the king a long and prosperous life and then reported a problem that he hoped might evoke the king's sympathy. "The city where my ancestors have been buried has fallen into ruin." Interestingly, scholars point out that Nehemiah never says Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that Artaxerxes thought Jerusalem was a rebellious city, so Nehemiah carefully avoided mentioning the city's name. However, other scholars suggest that Artaxerxes knew it was Jerusalem and thought this might be a good time to have a fortified city in that region, especially with the Egyptians beginning to amass power just a little further

west. But whether it was by ignorance or design, King Artaxerxes then asked Nehemiah, “What is it you want?”

Nehemiah was in the right place at the right time. This was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He had probably rehearsed his speech a thousand times. But there, at the right place at a crucial point in time, Nehemiah prayed. With his heart probably beating out of his chest, he silently uttered a quick prayer to God.

Most of us know what it’s like to be in Nehemiah’s shoes. You’ve reached the key moment you’ve been long waiting for and you are praying – unmistakably – that things are going to work out the way they are intended to be. When you get down on one knee with a ring in hand, you pray that you remember to say all the things you want to say at this special moment. When you take the exam for your professional Boards, you pray that the answers will come to mind quickly and easily. For me, when I am about to walk into a hospital room where a trauma or death has taken place, I silently and quickly pray that God might give me the words to say and the ability to represent Christ to those who are distraught. In the biggest moment of his life – the moment that his vision hinged upon – Nehemiah prayed. Recognizing his dependency on God, he prayed...and then he boldly asked for what he needed to make this vision become a reality.

Diplomatically reminding the king that it was his right to make decisions, Nehemiah made three big asks. Can I take an extended leave of absence from my position as your cupbearer? Can I have some paperwork that will allow me to safely travel? Can I get some lumber to rebuild the gates? And, just like Ezra, Nehemiah proclaimed “the gracious hand of my God was upon me” because the King granted him what he wanted. Soon, Nehemiah was on his way to Jerusalem with an armed escort and with timber from the King’s forest.

Our scripture lesson this morning illustrates the fact that *what* always precedes *how*. We often know what God has put in our hearts long before we know how God intends to bring it about. And that was Nehemiah’s experience, too. He knew what God had called

him to do. But he didn't have a clue as to how or when God would pull it off. For four months, nothing happened. But God had a plan. God knew how to secure Nehemiah's release from service to the king. God had a plan for financing and overseeing the rebuilding of the walls. God had the *how* all worked out. What God needed was a *who*. By embracing the burden God had placed on his heart, Nehemiah became God's answer to *who*.ⁱⁱⁱ

You and I are also answers to *who*. I don't know exactly what the *what* is in your life, but I know that God calls people like you and me to make a difference. Perhaps it is to launch a new business whose product will save thousands of lives. Perhaps it is to return to school, to get that degree that will enable you to do the very thing God has been prompting you to do for years. Perhaps it is to fix a broken relationship with an estranged family member. Perhaps it is to double down on engaging with your neighbors with an eye towards Christ. Whatever the *what* is, you and I are the *who*. And what I know is that when God puts something in our hearts for us to do, our responsibility is to do what we know to do, and then wait for God to fill in the blanks. Because, after all, *how* is God's specialty.^{iv}

God knows how to get your business off the ground. God knows how you can pay for school. God knows how to get you over your hurt and to put your relationships back together. God knows how to reach your neighbors. The question of how should not be an obstacle because it is simply an opportunity for God to do what God does so well. We remind ourselves of God's "how-fulfillment" every Sunday morning when we go to the Lord's Table. There we recall that we were far from God without any idea *how* we could restore that relationship – *how* we could fix the mess we were in. But God was all about the *how*. God so loved the world that He sent his only Son to be our savior – that's *how* God took on the mess we made.

It took a pandemic to turn a simple paper cup – one man's burden for better health – into a household product. When the right circumstances arose, the time for the Dixie cup

had come. And the same is true for you and me. Chances are, God has placed some sort of concern upon your heart – something that’s keeping you awake at night. Something or someone you think about as you drive down the road. Something or someone you worry about as you tuck your kids into bed at night. Whatever that *what* is in your life, even if you don’t know how to make it happen, now is the time for prayer and preparation. Because soon, the opportunity is going to come. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe five years from now. And when the opportunity comes, what you can trust is that God has already taken care of the *how*. What’s left for us is to trust and depend upon God to see our vision become a reality.

What comes with that time of waiting is an opportunity to imagine. To imagine the hungry being fed, relationships being restored, career paths lining up with God’s call, ministries humming on all cylinders, people coming to know Christ, the lives of our family and friends and neighbors being transformed...all because we prayed and planned over the *what* God had planted inside us and trusted God for the *how*. The question is, when the right circumstances intersect with the right time, will you be ready when someone asks you, “What do you want?” Because that moment will be your opportunity to fulfill the life-transforming vision God has given you.

ⁱ The history of the Dixie Cup comes from three sources:

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<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-unnatural-history-of-the-dixie-cup-119828457>

ⁱⁱ Stanley, Andy, *Visioneering*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.