

Are you as sick of the summer of 2011 as I am? Flood. Drought. Famine. Political Breakdown. Cultural breakdown. Economic breakdown. I'm enough of a movie fan that the famous speech from Howard Beale – the news-anchor-turned-prophet from the film *Network* – keeps echoing through my head: "I don't have to tell you things are bad," he begins. "Everyone knows things are bad. It's a depression. Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job. The dollar buys a nickel's worth; banks are going bust; shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter; punks are running wild in the street; and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it. We all know things are bad – worse than bad – they're crazy."

I don't have to tell you things are bad. The streets of Damascus and Tripoli are littered with bodies. The streets of Oslo and Tokyo are flooded with tears. The streets of London and Birmingham are burning with rage. The streets of New York, Washington, Philadelphia, overcome with panic and fear. Are you as sick of the summer of 2011 as I am? We all know things are bad. And yet somehow, the image that will haunt my lament for this summer is not the image of riots in the streets or gridlock in the corridors of power. Rather, it is the image of the U.S. Space Shuttle making its final flight. Admittedly, I'm the target demographic, with at least one if not more model-kit space shuttles still in attic storage, legacies of a childhood fascinated by the galaxy at my doorstep. But with the shuttle grounded for the last time, as our nation now tries to outsource its starbound hopes to private enterprise, foreign governments, really, anybody who can afford to have these dreams in our place – with the symbol of what we once longed to be now a matter for museum exhibition, a relic of something gone by – with things this bad, how are we to conclude anything but that the aspirations of our time are bound for that same dusty attic, behind some antique luggage, underneath an old sheet someone put there in case the roof leaked, a single forgotten cardboard box labeled "What Might Have Been"? Did we give up our dreams? Did they give up on us? I don't have to tell you things are bad.

Israel knows that attic well. During the exile, that attic is where Jerusalem lived, the fallen city, alive only in the imagination and memory of its exiles, the far-off home that used to be, that might have been. The city of David, the city of God, the city of God's house – the place we used to live, before our dreams died. In Babylon, there just wasn't room for dreaming. We had to downsize; they went in the attic, behind the luggage. You know the spot. But in our text today, something is remarkably different. The dark night of exile has passed. Ezra is leading the remnant in Jerusalem. And then far away, in the Persian capital, a Jewish government official named Nehemiah – working as a representative to the Persian court -- hears the news: the Jerusalem walls have been destroyed. As if exile hadn't been bad enough.

You will think of the walls first and foremost as a symbol of security. And certainly you wouldn't be wrong. But this isn't just a matter of defense spending. Take a few facts into consideration: Jerusalem is in the mountain range of central Israel. City walls would be the first thing weary exiles saw on their way home, the only sight of the distant city for miles of wilderness. In Jericho, Rahab made her home inside the city walls – this isn't just protection, it's part of the fabric of the people. As if to prove that point, much later, in the Revelation of John on Patmos, he sees a new heavenly Jerusalem, populated by the saints, and surrounded by walls of intricate design and detail. What Heavenly city would need walls for defense? And yet how could Jerusalem be complete without them? As the walls of Jerusalem go, so goes the city herself, her people, her dreams, her hopes. That the walls have fallen – well, I don't have to tell you things are bad.

Of course, in the summer of 2011 we land quickly in the problem Cindy described last week, the problem of locating ourselves in this particular text. That Israel even has the opportunity to return to Jerusalem – that they even have political voice of the sort that Nehemiah represents – suggests that, in some important way, things for Israel are better than they were. And yet for us today so many of the voices we hear would suggest that our exile is yet to come. It has been 28 years since Ronald Reagan famously declared it to be "morning in America," whether or not you agreed with him the first time around, it is nothing short of politically fashionable to declare us now to be in an imminent sort of decline. Morning for Nehemiah's Jerusalem, perhaps, but not here: if you don't believe me, go home and Google "twilight in America," "evening in America," or "midnight in America" and let the vitriol wash over you. One of the rhetorical battlegrounds in the political warfare of our time is over the position of the hands on this metaphorical clock: What hour does the bell toll? For whom? Is it too late to rebuild? If the walls of our city have been destroyed, what are we to do now with these boxed-up dreams?

For Nehemiah, the answer is this: an act of responsible government service, or blatant pork-barrel politics or, I just like to think, radical hopefulness. Nehemiah lobbies the King for the chance to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. Our text today is but the prologue to this act, the prayer of a man about to ask the government for money, the prayer of a man who knows full well wherein the dreams of his people lie.

*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.* I mean no insult to Nehemiah when I say that much of this prayer sounds fairly generic. It's a kind of greatest-hits piece of classical Torah theology. I picture one of those commercials for Time-Life compilations where they scroll the song titles and play you the samples. Ooh, they've got the one about covenant and fidelity. He uses that line about keeping commandments, even the bit about praying day and night! It's got all my favorites! Until this one remarkable moment where he puts himself on the line: "Both I and my family have sinned." It's commonplace in Jewish liturgy to speak of the collective nation as a single entity: the people

of Israel, the sins of the people of Israel. So many of the prayers have been refined and shaped into prayers for collective use, so it's something altogether different to have this striking moment of individuality. *Both I and my family have sinned.* What if I said it this way? *Our Father, who art in Heaven... Forgive us our debts – especially mine. I have ignored my neighbor in need.* It jumps off the page. And there's no reason to think he's referring to something particularly egregious. This is the first time we've met Nehemiah, we know nothing about him, we have no reason to single him or his family out. He's not the Zodiac killer. He didn't invent the credit default swap. He's just a guy: both I and my family have sinned.

I have to admit that I find Nehemiah's personal aside entirely refreshing. I am sure many of you will have read Warren Buffett's *Times* editorial of last week in which he urges economic policymakers, in his words, to "Stop Coddling the Super-Rich." Now, I'm not an economic policymaker, and there's a very good reason for that. But in a cultural landscape obsessed with figuring out what "we" have to do, where "we" went wrong, how "we" should rebuild these walls, is there not something altogether exhilarating about one citizen, for one moment, just for the briefest of instants, raising his hand and saying "It begins with me." Both I and my family have sinned. How are we to rebuild such a broken world? Don't fall into the trap. The point is not to find a nearby bandwagon and say, "Yes, it begins with Warren Buffett!" The point is this: It begins with me. It begins with you. It starts with each of us, in confession. The things we each have broken. The good we each have left undone.

Of course, starting with the individual is the only option available to a nation in exile, a nation scattered from Jerusalem. Nehemiah is in a distant capital, he's not even with the people that he names in his prayer. Which is, of course, precisely the point, as Nehemiah reminds God of God's promises. *'Though your outcasts are under the farthest skies'* – God's words, in quotes – *"I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name."* That's the dream: the nation rebuilt, the temple rebuilt, the hopes of a people, rebuilt. The gathering-together of all that has been scattered, set to the wind, torn apart. And so even as it starts with me, this isn't old-fashioned American individualism. This isn't Nehemiah just looking out for his own interests, figuring that what was good for the one would be good for the many. Frankly, he's a highly-ranking government official, probably living a life of relative ease. Nehemiah's got a good thing going. If this were America, Nehemiah would be exalted as a sign that there was no brokenness there to be fixed. But for Israel in exile the dream of Jerusalem is a collective dream. It's a dream that binds Nehemiah even to those scattered far from his sight; it's a dream that says: that which is broken can be rebuilt, those who are scattered will be together again; it begins with me, but it's about all of us.

In our Gospel text today, one could weep as Caiaphas *almost* gets the point. Jesus is on the loose, and the religious leaders of Roman-occupied Israel are worried that the imperial authorities will punish the whole nation for the revolutionary teachings of this one man. Caiaphas, the high priest at the time – he's so close that it hurts. *"You know nothing at all!"* he says. *"You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."* Do you hear it? Yes, that preacher is right! It is time for Warren Buffett, or Jesus, or anybody else, to take personal responsibility! But of course Caiaphas is closer than he'll ever know, an clandestine prophet of things to come. John loves the irony: that, quite unbeknownst to Caiaphas, Jesus will in fact *"die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God."* In Caiaphas' Israel, the exile is long over, but Nehemiah's dream, the dream of God's people, continues, the dream to one day overcome the brokenness of this world, the dream of God gathering up the pieces of what might have been. And in the summer of 2011 that dream lives still: that God will gather up our sorrow, that God will gather up our fear, that God will gather up our despair. But what Caiaphas doesn't know is that he's the prophet of a foregone conclusion. On his unwitting lips is the true paradox of the Christian faith: we dream to rebuild a world that God has already overcome. And in this broken time of in-between we are not wrong to make our confession – yes, it starts with me – but here also is our assurance: that this dream ends where it truly always began, all of us gathered around a cross to watch a man die in the afternoon. All of us gathered around an empty grave to watch God overturn the world by the first light of dawn.

I don't have to tell you things are bad. Scattering and exile are the buzzwords of the day. This congregation has been no exception. I have the privilege of preaching on the only Sunday this August in which you will not say some kind of institutional farewell: to Jodi and myself, and, of course, to Mark. The God who sends us from our places of comfort, the God who scatters us into the world like seed upon the land, this is the same God who gathers us in the first place, who gathers us in the last place, who gathers us in every place where he sets his name. And so this moment is the best chance I have to offer my sincere thanks for the ways in which you all transformed the place to which I was sent into the place wherein I was called. On the cusp of departure it is my confident hope that says: God is not yet done gathering us together.

In fact it is our Christian faith that says: God is not yet done gathering us together. God is not done with the brokenness of this world, not in London, not in Damascus, not in Tripoli, not in Philadelphia. Though the streets of the city weep tears of sorrow. Though the nation should tear itself in two. Though the earth should change. Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. I don't have to tell you things are bad. But I have to tell you this: Christians live in-between the brokenness of the world and the breaking-in of God. We live in this motion, scattered to the winds, gathered from the storm, somehow perpetually straddling the end of the age and the beginning of the next. The world that was broken has already been reclaimed by a God whose dreams for us know no boundary and no expiration. You don't get off easy: a man stands before a king and says: it begins with me. You stand before a broken world that demands nothing less from you than everything God has called you to be, unquenchable witnesses to resurrection hope. But you're not alone: a man stands before a cross and says: It begins with me. And when we are all gathered in the darkest hour of the night, just before dawn, I do have to tell you this: the sun will rise. And look, he is risen indeed!