

LIFE GATES, PART II

Sermon, February 24, 2019

Text: Nehemiah 3:1-12, and a special Responsive Reading (attached)

These past weeks we began taking a look at the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which is the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in the fifth century before Christ. As mentioned, this book is so much more than the story of a restoring of physical walls around the city. It is also a story of the restoring of a people from despair to hope. It's a story of restoring people from despair and ruin to a robust and confident walk with God. And as previously mentioned, Jerusalem in ruins can also be seen as a picture of a life ... a life like yours and mine that was created to be a beautiful dwelling place of God's spirit, but now is in need of restoration, salvaging, salvation. Last week we began a tour of the city gates of the old Jerusalem of Nehemiah's time. Gates are the means of access and egress the city, the way things come in and go out. If we carry this allegory through, that building this wall and restoring its gates can be likened to a portrayal of a life being salvaged and restored from ruin, then the work starts with the gates ... with what we let into, and what we let come out of, our lives. As we compass the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 3, ten gates are mentioned in order: The Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Jeshana (*or Old*) Gate, the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate (*yes, there is a Dung Gate*), the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate (*not to be confused with the one in D.C.*), the Horse Gate, the East Gate, and the Inspection Gate. Each gate can be an allegory for a gateway of life which needs to be rebuilt, repaired, maintained.

As noted last week, the first and most important gate slated for repair and restoration was the **Sheep Gate**. In the work of Jerusalem's restoration, this special gate received foremost attention; it's the gate through which the High Priest himself went to work, and it's the gate through which the sheep were brought into the Temple for sacrifice (*notice, too, this is the only gate mentioned in Nehemiah 3 that does not have bolts and bars; we'll get to that in a moment.*) As we read last week, Jesus tells us in John 10, "*I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.*" In short, perhaps drawing on this old city gate imagery, Jesus is asserting, "*I am the Sheep Gate.*" As we concluded last time, in the work of personal restoration/renovation, dedicating primary attention to our religious life, our relationship with the Sheep Gate (*or gate-keeper*) Jesus Christ, is the most important and necessary first step. If Jesus is the primary Gate in our lives, that means nothing should come into or go out of our lives that cannot pass His inspection, His scrutiny. Our relationships, our work ethic, our viewing habits, our language ... whatever is coming into or going out of our lives had better be able to pass through Jesus' loving scrutiny; that's how one begins a successful restoration.

The next gate, and very close to the Sheep Gate, is the **Fish Gate**. It was called the Fish Gate because the fishermen from Galilee and the Mediterranean coast would bring their fish into the city through this gate, thus nourishing and feeding and sustaining the city. The Fish Gate might stand as a symbol that we be engaged in productive activity if we are able, bringing sustenance to where we live; having and doing meaningful work is of great assistance in restoring order and stability and structure and purpose to our lives while also serving for the betterment of the community as a whole. Idleness is often a hotbed for ruin. But to take the symbolism of restoration a step further: Remember what Jesus said to His disciples: "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" He spoke these words to men who were professionals; professionals who made their living by fishing. So, the allegorical inference of the Fish Gate in the work of personal restoration is to (a) follow Jesus (*get your Sheep Gate in order*), and then (b) use your profession, your work, everything you are and do, as a means to the greater end of bringing others into the City of God. That's a crucial part of what it means to follow Jesus. Keep the Fish Gate in good repair; the Fish Gate needs attention in the work of restoration, and is second in importance only to restoring the Sheep Gate. Notice in verse 5... this was the gate where the Tekoan "nobles" would not go to work ... we talked about this last week, how God has recorded the names of goof-offs recorded for all posterity as well.

I don't want to stretch the analogy too far, but there may be significance in the detail that it was this particular gate where these old leaders wouldn't lend a helping hand ... they slacked off here! Some of you may remember a quote I've cited six or seven times over the past two decades that was credited to church historian Martin Marty. He pointed out there is one word that defines the difference between churches that grow and churches that do not - the word "**Invite!**" Dr. Marty cited a study at the time indicating the average Presbyterian invited someone to church once every twenty-four years (!). A story circulated in the San Jose Presbytery reports that figure was shared with an elder commissioner who snorted, "*I don't buy that number, 24 years. I've been a Presbyterian forty years ... and I've never invited anyone to church!*" That elder was probably Tekoan! Other polls cited in various publications indicate that some **82-84%** of church members surveyed said they first came to church because of an invitation from a friend or relative. Now, if over eighty percent of church members first came to church through the invitation of a friend or relative, **and** the average Presbyterian only invites people to church once every twenty-four years ... well,

do the math. We Presbyterians need to repair our Fish Gates! And work on being better "Fishers of Men." As one pastor put it, *"The church that doesn't evangelize will fossilize!"* The Sheep Gate is where we begin the work of restoration; then out of loving concern for others and for the growth, nourishment and continued sustenance of the community, we go fishing! That is our calling, bringing others into the city of God, which is not only a loving thing to do, but it will serve to better sustain that community and ensure its vitality. Don't let that gate fall into disrepair. Again, not only does it build up the church, but it really is the loving thing to do for our neighbors, friends and acquaintances. Few things will invigorate our life of faith and give enthusiasm to our work of restoration than the joy, enthusiasm and delight of seeing others come to saving faith in the one who calls Himself the Sheep Gate, that one gate that does not have bars and bolts on it ... that gate is open to all. And perhaps the best way to go about getting the Fish Gate in good working order and being fishers of men is to get to work restoring the next gate: **The Jeshanah Gate**, which in Hebrew is the **"Old Gate."**

This gate was the entryway to the old main path of the city, the old, tried and proven way to best get about the city. Allegorically speaking, don't ignore the Old Gate just because it's old; don't disdain the old traditions, the old paths. In the work of restoration this can represent the old ways of truth laid down long, long ago ... rather than the new illusions that pass themselves off as truth. The first verse in our responsive reading is from Jeremiah 6, where the prophet speaks for the Lord and says, *"Ask for the ancient paths. Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."* Part of that verse was left out of the insert, God goes on to point out, *"But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'" And because they did not walk in the old paths, they did NOT find rest for their souls; their lives became anything but restful.* As Micah reminds us in the next verse of that responsive reading, God has told us what is good; He has long ago made it clear to us. People are always looking for novelty, but too often the "new" just gets people more lost, confused and removed from the tried and true paths. The tried and true old ways need to be recovered, not replaced! The tried and true ways of godliness, honesty, truthfulness, fidelity, goodness, self control, perseverance, love really are the best. If something is true, it usually is not new, and if it is new, then it usually is not true ... because real truth never changes. Truth remains the same throughout the centuries.

So this gate calls us back to the time-tested godly ways that have led and will still lead to stability, security, serenity. God has told us what is good. Let us walk in those ways. Re-establish the Sheep Gate (*get right with Jesus Christ, Who also claims to BE the Way*), then work on bringing others in through the Fish Gate *by way of* the restoring the Old Gate, making the old paths clear and vital again. The world uses the idea of something "new" to catch people, the Bible says we need to use something old. Something trusted. Something true. I love it that this is the one gate mentioned here in chapter three that specifically lists some young people working with everyone else to restore it. In this work of restoration the people are engaged in doing something to attract and involve the young people! And they DON'T do it by throwing out the old; they do so by enlisting them in restoring and clarifying the good old ways.

Randy Cohen, who writes "The Ethicist" column for **The New York Times Magazine**, does not claim to be a religious man; in fact, he says he is something of a radical secularist. In a 2010 interview in Homiletics magazine he made the following comment: *"New York at 33rd and Broadway is a big transportation hub. Penn Station's right there. A lot of commuter trains stop there; it's also a major subway stop. Thousands and thousands of people are pouring out all at the same time and what everybody wants more than anything else is this: a taxi. Now I've been in New York for thirty years, and the most appalling episodes of violence I've seen since I've been here were committed there at 33rd and Broadway.. People did just terrible things. Then not long ago, someone did something very simple. They re-painted a very faded yellow stripe down the sidewalk and they re-stenciled two faded words – the words CAB LINE. It's the most astonishing thing. It utterly transformed behavior there. Now nearly everyone, almost all the time, simply waits in line. It's magnificent. It's never enforced -- there are no "line" police there. But we clarified the physical conditions, [i.e., we let people know where the old lines were], we made it possible for people to behave, we invited them to behave, and they behaved!"¹*

Many people just want to know where the lines are! They want to know that there ARE lines, trusted lines, helpful lines that encourage civil and loving and productive behavior, and I'm convinced the majority of decent people just want affirmation that the old lines are valid and good. Not only is this something every parent should know ... and we should ... but it is something all of us should know. The old lines of God's good law may have become blurred, faded, fallen into disuse, but they are good lines! Society is crumbling because we've left the law of God and/or have allowed the old lines to fade from disuse and inattention. We need to restore the Old Gate, not rid ourselves of it; we need to give attention to the tried and true old ways, to clarify the good and gracious and helpful lines of moral law, set down in the Bible, for the good of all.

So to summarize: Bring people through the Fish Gate by way of the Old Gate that they, too, might find shelter, salvation and hope on this side of the Sheep Gate. We'll continue our Gates tour next time.

¹ See <https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/cohen.asp>

RESPONSIVE READING

From Psalm 24:9-10, Jeremiah 6:16, Micah 6:8, II Peter 1:3-7, II Corinthians 7:1, Philippians. 4:8, Romans 12:9, Hebrews 13:20-21
(New International Version, Revised Standard Version and New English Bible translations)

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

WHO IS THIS KING OF GLORY? THE LORD OF HOSTS, HE IS THE KING OF GLORY!

This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."

HE HAS SHOWED YOU, O MAN, WHAT IS GOOD; AND WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU, BUT TO DO JUSTICE, AND TO LOVE KINDNESS AND TO WALK HUMBLLY WITH YOUR GOD.

His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and godliness, enabling us to know the One who called us by His own glory and goodness.

THROUGH THESE HE HAS GIVEN US HIS VERY GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES, SO THAT THROUGH THEM WE MAY PARTICIPATE IN THE DIVINE NATURE AND ESCAPE THE CORRUPTION IN THE WORLD CAUSED BY EVIL DESIRES.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

SINCE WE HAVE THESE PROMISES, DEAR FRIENDS, LET US PURIFY OURSELVES FROM EVERYTHING THAT CONTAMINATES BODY AND SPIRIT, PERFECTING HOLINESS OUT OF REVERENCE FOR GOD.

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things.

LOVE MUST BE GENUINE. HATE WHAT IS EVIL; HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD.

May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will,

AND MAY HE MAKE OF US WHAT HE WOULD HAVE US BE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO WHOM BE GLORY FOR EVER AND EVER! AMEN.

The Word of the Lord.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Walls and Their Builders

Nehemiah 3 tells us the names of many who help rebuild Jerusalem's wall

