

## No "FOX PAUSE"

Sermon, March 17, 2019

The Second Sunday in Lent

Texts: Nehemiah 4:1-3, Luke 13:31-35, Philippians 3:12-4:1

As we commemorated the Transfiguration and began the season of Lent, I took a two week break from our study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. I began preparing this sermon with the intention to pick up that series, as well as to incorporate what I saw as a common and timely theme threading its way through Nehemiah 4 and the lectionary texts for today, Luke 13:31-35 and Philippians 3:12-4:1 ... how Nehemiah, Jesus and Paul all refused to be discouraged and persisted in doing what God was calling them to do. However, I saw it was going to be way too long; so I basically cut it roughly in half; we'll come back to the study of Nehemiah at another time, perhaps next week. But for today, I did want to begin with just this one excerpt from Nehemiah 4. A quick background: Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem were hard at work on this ambitious project of rebuilding the protective wall around the city. Not everyone was on board with this project, however; two local officials were quite content with the status quo and did not want to see a unified Jewry living in a fortified Jerusalem: Sanballat, the governor of Samaria (*which roughly corresponds to what we call today the West Bank*), and Tobiah, an official in Ammon (*which corresponds roughly to today's Jordan*).

*(Nehemiah 4:1-3) "When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble -- burned as they are?' Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, 'What they are building -- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones.'" And one could imagine Tobiah adding, "Har, har, har!"*

As you can read later in this chapter, the taunts and the threats began to take their toll among the workers, particularly this last taunt of a little fox knocking over everything they had accomplished to date. You might say Tobiah's taunting image of a fox began to give them pause, a "fox pause" (*hence, the bad pun in the sermon title, which is how some people mispronounce the term "faux pas" ... which describes a social mistake or gaffe, an awkward misstep. In French, it literally translates "false step"*). Fatigue and frustration were setting in; nerves were fraying, resolve was weakening. A rebuilding program that began in a rush of enthusiasm was now deteriorating into a daily grind of discouragement exacerbated by this opposition. You see in verse 10 that the people started to say, *"There is so much rubble that we can't do the work."* Now, the rubble was always there; it was certainly there when they enthusiastically started the work. But instead of being enthusiastic *visionaries* of a restored Jerusalem, their mounting discouragement caused the builders to become *rubble-gazers*. The more discouraged they became, the more they focused on the rubble ... and the more they focused on the rubble, on what "couldn't" be done, the more discouraged they became.

One of the deadliest diseases known to the human race is the disease of **discouragement**. It's a disease that works at direct odds against accomplishment, against getting anything good done. Three things make discouragement such a potent disease: *First, it can strike everyone*. None of us are immune. Everyone will catch this disease at one time or another. Young or old, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, healthy or sick, advantaged or disadvantaged, religious or non-religious ... **everyone** gets discouraged. *Second, the disease of discouragement is recurring*. Being discouraged once does not give us an immunity. And the vaccine hasn't been invented yet that can give us immunity to this disease of discouragement. We can be afflicted by it over and over again. In fact, we can even be increasingly discouraged by the fact that we are discouraged a lot; it feeds on itself. *Third, this disease is highly contagious*. It spreads by even casual contact. Whenever and wherever people are gathered together, discouragement can spread very quickly (*by the way, so does optimism and a "can do" attitude ... that can also be contagious in a really good way, but that's almost another sermon!*) You can become discouraged because other people are discouraged. People can become discouraged because *you* are discouraged. So, in any good work, follow Nehemiah's example here and *expect discouragement, pray, and don't stop working, don't stop doing what God has called you to do*.

In our Gospel lesson we read about another potentially discouraging fox. Some friendly Pharisees had come to Jesus to warn of King Herod's designs on His life. Remember, this was the same King Herod who was responsible for the arrest and the eventual beheading of John the Baptist. John had been jailed because he openly criticized Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's divorced wife. So, this was Herod's way of dealing

with opposition that threatened his status quo: Just shut the opposition up. So, when the Pharisees warned Jesus, Jesus replied. *"Oh. Yikes. Well, if the political climate is that oppositional right now, perhaps I'd better come back later."*

No, that's not what He said. Jesus would **not** be discouraged and/or deterred from doing what He had come to Jerusalem to do. He replies, *"Go tell that fox Herod ..."* In that agrarian society, foxes were just considered troublesome pests to the crops and livestock ... sly, clever, cunning and conniving pests, but pests all the same. Jesus continued with an unswerving resolve in so many words, *"I must keep going today and tomorrow, and the next day. I must be on my way, and this fox will not give me pause, he will not deter or discourage me."* There will be no "fox pause," no missteps; Jesus will continue on His determined path. In the greater scheme of things, Herod may be king, but Jesus is the King of kings. Herod the Fox will not discourage Jesus from doing what He had come to do, what God had called Him to do. That "fox" will not give Him "pause;" Jesus will not be discouraged from carrying out the will of God. To mix metaphors, Jesus is not going to be a rubble gazer; He will keep the divine vision, the divine focus, and do what it takes to secure full restoration and redemption for His people. Jesus is journeying closer to Jerusalem, and He knows, closer to His death. He knew from an historical perspective the nature of this city, but He WILL travel to Jerusalem and meet head on the traumatic tradition of that city that kills the prophets and stones those God sends. In short, it is the divine Plan that He will indeed "give it up" in order that we might "get it all."

In like manner, anything or anyone who would deter or discourage us from doing what we know is right and good, from doing what we believe to be the will of God in our lives, from doing what we know is the loving thing to do, that person or thing is little more than a destructive pest and should be treated accordingly! Imagine Jesus saying, *"A 'pox' on that fox and on any other pesky discouragements. I intend to continue to fulfill what My Father has called me to do, I intend to carry out what I understand to be the will of God, I will see this work of restoration and redemption through, come what may."* He had a driving sense of divine purpose and right-ness about what He was doing, and it kept Him going.

This is the same determined Jesus who "took hold" of Paul as we read this morning from Philippians 3; listen again to Paul's words: *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. -- Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* You may know Paul wrote those words from prison; in fact, he spent the last five years or so of his life in prison. Roughly twenty-five percent of the book of Acts is devoted to the imprisonment of the apostle Paul, as if to imply that approximately twenty-five percent of the time followers of Jesus may be led by the Spirit to places they'd rather not go, or be led to associate with people they'd just as soon avoid ... largely because these are also places and people that the Savior loves. We may think at times we are in the wrong place, but even the wrong place can be the right place, if you are faithful to Jesus Christ, who is every place. Wherever we are of use to Him; that's the right place for us to be.

You may remember the 10-90 principle: 10% of life is made up of what happens to us. 90% of life is affected by how we react to that 10%. We really have no control over 10% of what happens to us. But we do have a measure of control over how we will respond, and how we respond can have a profound effect over everything else that follows. As your pastor, I know many of you sitting here this morning have had very difficult and discouraging issues of health, loss, family difficulties and/or other setbacks in that 10% of life over which no one has control. Your faithful presence here this morning is silent testimony to the fact that you have chosen to try and respond well, by the grace of God and the strength of your character. You might think a driven, Type-A personality like Paul would have gone crazy having to spend so much time in prison. But it was during this time he wrote his epistles to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians, each written with some of his most tender words. There is just no trace of discouragement, resentment, bitterness, anger, or faith-less cynicism in these inspiring and uplifting epistles written during his imprisonment that continue to bless us to this day. Again, we may think at times that we are in the wrong place, but even the wrong place can be the right place, if we are faithful to Jesus Christ, Who is every place. Don't be discouraged ... where ever we are of use to God; that is the right place for us to be.

Paul continues: *"Join with others in following my example; take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame."* One final thought: there's a whole sermon itself in the words *"Their destiny is destruction ..."* As Elbert Hubbard once wrote, *"Men are not punished for their sins, but by them."* What theology may call punishment, nature calls consequences. God's ways are good ways; going against them has grave and often destructive consequences. Paul concludes, *"Their mind is on earthly things **But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body. Therefore ... that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!"***

And do not let any "fox pauses" discourage or deter you from doing what God has called you to do.