

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
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A Theology of the City – House of Heroes  
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This past week, Lora and I were listening to a podcast called Stuff You Missed in History Class. Now, I love history, if you had asked me when I was a junior in high school, I would have told you that I wanted to teach history. And so we're listening to this podcast about the first female pilot in America, not Amelia Earhart, no, an African American woman named Bessie Coleman, and we get to the end of the podcast and they announced that they're going to do a live taping of this podcast in Washington, DC at the Miracle Theater. I'm thinking we have no excuse not to go and so Thursday night we go to a taping of the show and sure enough it was stuff we had missed in history class. Is it okay if we have a little bit of fun this weekend, and if I title my message 'Stuff We Missed in History Class'?

On September 18th, 1793, President George Washington led a parade of people across the Potomac Yard. They marched 1.5 miles to Jenkins Hill; George Washington stepped into a foundation trench. The cornerstone of the capital was consecrated with corn, wine and oil; an invocation was given, a 15 gun salute for the 15 United States at the time, and a 500 pound oxen was butchered, thereby establishing the great American tradition of the barbecue. It was a significant day in the history of our city, but the back-story of this back water region goes much further back than that. Long before white settlers arrived, the tribe of Native Americans lived on the banks of the Potomac River, it was their fishing ground, they were the Algonquins. And at the foot of the very hill where George Washington laid the cornerstone of the capital was their council house. It was their capital before it was ours.

Now, fast forward June 5, 1633, a 400 piece acre piece of property was deeded to an European immigrant by the name of Francis Pope, (not to be confused with Pope Francis). It's not easy to discern the exact boundaries of his property because two oak trees are actually two of the boundary markers, but according to the standard history of the city of Washington, from the study of original sources published in 1913, Pope's property included Jenkins Hill. Pope did something curious, he named his property "Rome" and he called the creek that ran through his property Tiber Creek. Now in case you care, we know where Tiber Creek is; it runs right under Ebenezer's Coffeehouse. We know this because when we went to build Ebenezer's Coffeehouse, we found it in the foundation of our coffee house. It costs us \$40,000 to build a bathtub around that performance space. Back to this 400 acre piece of property called Rome. Some thought it was nothing more than a playful pond because his name was Pope, but Pope was prophetic. I'll quote the standard history. It says, it is told of this dreamer that he predicted that a greater capital than Rome would occupy that hill and that later generations would command a great and flourishing country in the new world. He related that he had had a dream or a vision in which he had seen a splendid parliament house on the hill, now known as Capitol Hill, which he purchased and called Rome in prophetic honor of the great city to be. Stuff you may have missed in history class. Let me pause there.

And this weekend we begin a series called House of Heroes and I kinda like that because I can't think of a better description of this church. I want to reverse engineer over the next three weeks, the book of Nehemiah, some leadership lessons, some life lessons, I want to give us a theology of the city. I want to cast a vision for our next chapter as a church and along the way I want to celebrate some of the unsung heroes here at NCC. And when this series is said and done, my hope and prayer is this, that you would have a little bit bigger heart for the community that surrounds your campus and a little clearer vision of where God is taking us as a church.

If you have a Bible, you can turn it over to the book of Nehemiah, chapter one, verse one.

*1 These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa.*

*2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.*

Let me stop here for a moment, this is a key question. Nehemiah asks how things are going in Jerusalem. Biblical exegesis is important. Exegesis, fancy word means to interpret. Second Timothy 2:15 says this; study to show yourself approved, how, by rightly dividing by exegeting, the word of truth. Here's what I've discovered. If you don't rightly divide the word of truth, you divide people and we call those divisions, denominations, but that's another sermon for another day. Biblical exegesis is important, especially in the epicenter of political correctness. For the record, I'd rather be biblically correct than politically correct.

Well, let me flip that coin it. Cultural exegesis is important as well. 1 Chronicles 12:32 talks about the tribe of Issachar and described them this way. They understood the signs of the times and knew what Israel should do. When it comes to a theology of the city, culture elected Jesus is key. You cannot incarnate the Gospel if you don't exege the culture, and it begins with the question that Nehemiah asks. How are things going in Gainesville, in Kingstowne, at Potomac Yard, at Echostage, at Ballston, at the Lincoln Theater, at Barracks Row [inaudible].

*3 They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."*

*4 When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*

When was the last time you wept for the city where you live? When you think about following Christ, you may think that, that sounds ancillary, but it is not. Do you know that there are only two instances in the Gospels where it says that Jesus wept. One is at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and the other is right before the triumphal entry, when he's getting ready to go into the city of Jerusalem and he weeps over the city. Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?

I had a wonderful professor in grad school who asked a brilliant question when it comes to discerning God ordained passions. He said what makes you cry or pound your fist on the table? In other words, what makes you sad? What makes you mad? And I would add what makes you glad. Listen, we're not equally passionate about all things, and can I say that that's okay? Now, we should have a baseline of concern, we ought to care about everything that God cares about, but listen to me, each of us is responsible for the passion that God has put in our heart, the thing that makes us mad or sad or glad. And then we've got to acknowledge those passions that God has given to other people, and when we do that, guess what? Now we begin to function as the body of Christ and we impact the communities around us.

Here's Nehemiah in a nutshell. God breaks Nehemiah's heart for broken city. This is not a book about rebuilding the wall. This is a book about rebuilding God's people. It's about repairing their identity, restoring their faith, renewing their vision. This is about the revival that happens after the wall is built. Now the next six verses record Nehemiah's prayer for favor. It's the key that I think unlocks the rest of the book, but we're going to talk about it next weekend.

Verse 11, in those days, Nehemiah says, I was the king's cup-bearer. Let me zoom out and give a little bit of context. In 589 BC, the Babylonian army laid siege to the city of Jerusalem when they finally broke through the wall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, they plundered the temple, they raised the city and they took prisoners of war, most of them, the creative class and the upper class. For more than a century, this group of Jewish refugees lived as expats in Babylon. In 538 BC, Zerubbabel leads a remnant back to rebuild the temple; Ezra leads a second group back in 458 BC. By the way, there will not be a quiz at the end of this message. We pick up the story in 445 BC, the wall of Jerusalem is in ruins, and the significance of that is this; walls in that day and age where the first and last line of defense, the city is defenseless and that's when God calls this cup-bearer named Nehemiah to do something for which he is not qualified, and I loved that. Listen, as far as we know, no engineering experience, no architectural expertise, and it proves once again that God doesn't call the qualified he qualifies the call. Let me say this, this is not the Great Wall of China, it's not even the great pyramids of Egypt, but this isn't fixer upper either. Archaeologists have uncovered portions of that ancient wall and it measures 26 feet tall in some places in 16 feet wide in others. That's why it took the Babylonians 30 months to breach the wall. Now, the excavation director of one of those archaeological digs, Ronnie Reich, said this; he said, to build walls straight up 26 feet high, I don't know how to do it today without mechanical equipment. I don't think any engineer today without electrical power could do it yet against all odds Nehemiah does something that hadn't been done in 141 years. He rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem and he does it in 52 days flat. How does he do it? That's what we're going to talk about over these next three weeks.

Now, this story does not start in Jerusalem, it starts in Babylon and like Francis Pope's prophecy 141 years before there was a prophecy about 143 years before this that relates to this story. When the Jewish people were taken prisoners of war, they weren't sure if they would ever see Jerusalem again. They had to figure out how to live as refugees in a foreign city should they enculturate? In other words, should they adopt and adapt the traditions of the Babylonian people or should they try to remain distinct and hang onto their unique identity as a Jewish people? Do

they attempt to undermine the Babylonians or do they like Daniel influence Babylon from the inside out. These were practical questions they had to answer. These were difficult decisions they had to make and there were conflicting opinions. And I'll share those with you in a minute.

Before I do let me give you a multiple choice. When it comes to engaging culture, I think we have four options. A) We can mindlessly consume. B) We can pompously condemn. C) We can lazily copy and D) We can conscientiously create. Anybody want to guess what I'm advocating for? I think my use of adjectives is pretty evident, but the reality is I think there are a lot of Christians, a lot of churches that mindlessly consuming and pompously condemn and lazily copy and I think we can do better than that. I think we are called to conscientiously create. What does that look like? Well, I think it means we write better books, we produce better films, we draft better legislation, we run better campaigns, we design better spaces, we start better businesses, we create better art. How? With the help of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because we're not just building a church, we're blessing a city. And that brings us back to Babylon and these two conflicting opinions.

Alright, there was a prophet by the name of Hananiah who said that God would break the yoke of Babylon in two years time and that the articles that had been plundered from the temple would be returned as would the remnant of the Jewish people. Jeremiah said, you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. He knew that it would be a 70 year exile. I mean, what's the big deal; two years, 70 years. Listen, this time-frame is key when it comes to a theology of the city. If you're only gonna live in Babylon for two years as Hananiah suggested you are not going to engage the city the same way. You don't even unpack your suitcase. You rent the city. Why? Because you're only there for one election cycle, but if you're going to be there for 70 years to the third generation, it changes your mindset. It changes your strategy. You don't rent the city, you own it. Why? Because now you're playing the long game. That's what Jeremiah is advocating.

I can't frame an entire theology of the city in one message, but there is one prophecy in Jeremiah 21 that I want to focus on this weekend. Jeremiah writes an open letter to these exiles in Babylon and the advice he gives to these Jewish refugees, listen, it's as relevant today as it was 2,500 years ago. Now you know a piece of this prophecy because it's one of the most posterized verses in the Bible, Jeremiah 29:11.

*11" I know the plans I have for you," "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

It's one of our favorite promises, right? But this promise was part of a prophecy, that prophecy is part of a theology of the city and this theology of the city is quite counter intuitive. Babylon was Israel's arch enemy. They plundered their temple. They mocked their God. You would think that Jeremiah might just council a coup d'état. Listen to what he says, build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, (that's a second generation), so that they too may have sons and daughters, (that's the third generation) increase in number there do not decrease. What

Jeremiah is saying is don't rent the city, play the long game, put down roots, do things that are going to make a difference seventy years from now, do things that will set up the second and third generation.

When I cast the vision for our future next week, there are implications right here, right now, but it's not about us. Listen, it's about what God wants to do in us and through us to the third generation. Now, here's the heartbeat of this prophecy, and if you forget everything, its okay but I want you to get this in your spirit.

Verse seven,

*7 "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you in exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*

Are we doing this? I think we are. Listen, when we do second Saturday serve or Easter Extravaganza, what are we doing? I think we're seeking the peace and prosperity of our city. When we host the Living Room for our friends who are experiencing homelessness or we're resettling 65% of the refugees in the DMV. I think we're seeking the peace and prosperity of our city when we turned a crack house into a coffee house, when we turned in abandoned apartment building into a DC Dream Center. Listen, we were seeking the peace and prosperity of our city, but come on, we need to be a bigger blessing. We need to do it more, and here's what I want to believe. I want to believe that we're going to do things that are so significant that you could not write the history of this city without mentioning National Community Church.

A little marketing mantra; some travel agent must have come up with it; "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." It's not true, you know, but, we have a little bit of fun with it. What happens in DC does not stay in DC. You know this. Listen, as this city goes, so goes the nation. Every decision made here has a domino effect from the White House to the Capital to the Supreme Court. Now, I want you to hear this; Acts 17 says that God determined when and where you would be born, when and where you will live. God has called you for such a time as this. God has called you for such a place as this. We are not here by accident; we are here by divine appointment. God has called us to our nation's capital and we're not here just to build a church. We are here to bless a city, to do things that will make a difference 70 years from now.

Let me say a few things about cities in general, and then I want to talk about the DMV in particular. According to the United Nations 180,000 people move into cities every single day. Unfortunately, many churches have moved out while people have moved in or have failed to exegese the culture and incarnate the Gospel in a way that's impacted their city and that's why so many old church buildings are now condos. In 1900, only 14% of the world's population lived in cities; 1950 it's 30%; 2008 even split and according to UN's Population Division, by 2050, two thirds of the world's population will live in cities. Stick with me. Listen, we talk a lot about sending missionaries around the world as we should. The sun never sets on our missionary family, praise God, but we've got to be strategic, we've got to recognize that God is sending the nations to us. Do you know? 2016 US census found that 23% of people who live in the DMV are foreign born; huge implications and huge potential for us to love and serve this city.

I remember a few years ago, Dick Foth was preaching and he called me up on a Sunday afternoon and he wanted to tell me about everybody had met that weekend. He said, I met a family who had emigrated from China, I met a woman who got a green card, she's from Mongolia, met the German wife and of American diplomat who is the Consul General in Hamburg, Germany. And it just so happened that weekend I'd met an ambassador from Finland who was visiting one of our campuses that Sunday. And I'll never forget what Foth said in a very excited voice. He said, Mark, stay right where you are, you can reach the world. I love it. It's so true. Listen, do you know our, our Lincoln theater camp is by itself as 71 different nationalities. Psalm two says, ask of me and I will give the nations. Do you know that God is answering that prayer right in front of us? The world is coming to us, but are we ready to incarnate the Gospel for them? We are surrounded by tremendous needs, tremendous opportunity, we've got an exegete those opportunities, exegete those needs. There are 6,904 people right now experiencing homelessness in Washington DC. None of our campuses are exempt; 226 people in Alexandria, 221 people in Arlington, 400 people in Prince William County. There are 853 children and youth right now who are in the care of child and family services. There are 5,297 children and youth in Virginia who need a family. Why am I sharing those statistics? Because every number has a name, every name has a story and every story matters to God.

Next week, and this is the introduction for next week. Next week, I want to cast a vision for an unbelievable miracle that God did four years ago; gave us a city block. We haven't talked about it much because we had two tenants who we knew had leases until August of 2018. It's August of 2018. It's time to cast the vision about where God is taking us. I'll give you a little nickel tour via video next weekend. Can't wait. In phase one, we'll build a thousand seat auditorium, but it's not a thousand seats, its a thousand souls. Not about seating capacity, about sending capacity.

Phase two; a 20,000 square feet of kids ministry space. It'll double as a child development center Monday to Friday. Why? Well, a couple of reasons. One, 80% of millennials who grow up in church leave church. Come on, come on. We have got to disciple our kids because we want to add impact to the third generation.

Phase three, we have a core value. Church belongs in the middle of the marketplace. We're going to have a little bit of fun with that. We're going to have an Ebenezer's on steroids. We're going to build a mix-use marketplace.

Do we have that all figured out? No, I'm still exegeting those opportunities exegeting those needs. But here's what we're not going to do. We're not just going to build a church building that gets used once a week. We're going to bless the city. We're going to seek the peace and prosperity of our city.

Let me close with this. This week marks the one year anniversary of our DC Dream Center. One year ago this week the mayor came out, cut the ribbon, we opened the doors and do you know that over the past year, 60 mentors and more than 500 volunteers have served and loved and disciplined over 700 kids. It wasn't tax dollars that built that dream center. It was your generosity

giving above and beyond the tithes. Why? Because we're seeking the peace and prosperity of our city because we know if you want to change statistics, you've got to do it one kid at a time.

A couple of years ago with the help of our creative team, I don't know why I designed a tee shirt that said Dream, but I took out the 'e' put a little DC flag in there and I posted it on Instagram and next thing you know, everyone wants one. And until now that has not been possible, but here's what we're doing to celebrate our one year anniversary. We've created, I think we have a couple of pictures; we created a little dream box in that box are a couple of tee shirts, that kind of original dream design and I may be wearing the other one. We've got different hats you can choose from I think we have a picture, a tumbler, a pop socket, a dream journal. So how do I get a dream box you ask? Well, you join the Dream Team. Listen, this church fully funded that 5 million dollar Dream Center. Praise God! And this church underwrites much of the operating budget of our Dream Center. But wouldn't it be fantastic at a one year mark for a bunch of us to say, 'Hey, I'd love to be a part of that Dream Team and on a monthly basis support this Dream Center.' Listen, these boxes and everything in them - donated. So, that means that 100% of our pledges will go to support the DC Dream Center and if you want to be a part of that Dream Team, check it out <https://dcdreamcenter.com/>.

Now let me say this because they're going to be three people who think that we've turned the temple into a place of money changers. We have not. The money changers, they sold sacrifices that was cheap grace. This is about making a sacrifice and making a monthly investment because we're seeking the peace and prosperity of our city.

All right, we're almost done. You are doing great. And I know I'm talking fast, but I felt like I had a lot to say so I needed to talk fast. The book of Jeremiah is not about broken walls. It's about broken people. I want you to know if that's you today, you are in the right place. There is a God who is in the rebuilding business. He can rebuild your confidence. He can rebuild your reputation. He can rebuild your faith. He can rebuild relationships. He can rebuild your life. CS Lewis said this, 'when I invited Jesus into my life, I thought he was going to put up some wallpaper and hang a few pictures. But he started knocking out walls and adding on rooms. I said, I was expecting a nice cottage. He said, I'm making a palace in which to live.' I believe that God is doing that in you.

I'm going to invite, all of our worship teams at all of our campuses to come and we're going to sing this song glorious ruins. I love this one line of lyrics; "Let the ruins come to life". Listen I'm believing that for you this weekend. Let's not just sing it, let's declare it. He is the God who gives beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.