

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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A God-Sized Vision – House of Heroes

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[Video]

So, in 1996 August I do a 4.7 mile prayer, walk around a Capitol Hill and I turned the corner right here at 8th and M Street. We're right across the street from the Historic Navy Yard, of course we've got M Street shooting down this way, towards the baseball stadium, we've got 8th Street, a Barracks Row up this way, we are less than three tenths of a mile from the Miracle Theater where we currently meet. And so I turned this corner having no idea that 18 years to the day from the day of that 4.7 mile prayer circle, we would purchase the Blue Castle. And so we purchased it in August of 2014; absolute miracle, this is Promised Land and I want to give you a little nickel tour.

Okay, so before we pop inside let me give you a few fun facts. 1891 this property is purchased by the Georgetown and Washington Railroad Company. Cable cars are turning into electric cars at that point; they need another facility, to be the eastern terminus of the Streetcar System. And so they buy this block and in 1891, they designed this Romanesque revival castle, if you will and it opens for business. Then in 1962, January 28, the very last street car after a century of service, I mean street cars have ruled and reigned the city for a hundred years, the very last car at 4:45 AM, comes to the Navy Yard Car Barn. It literally comes into this space right here, it's now cinder-block, but it gets parked upstairs and stored for three years until Christmas Eve, 1965, and so little piece of history right here.

Let's go inside, I want to show you some of the old tracks that still exists. Here we go. This is the engineering room and you can still see some of these original tracks in the ground. These are where the tracks would have come into the building from the street and the car would have run right up in this area from 1962 until 1965. This was a street car graveyard. Alright, so we're out here on the roof deck of half of the building. We're literally one mile from the capitol. Alright, we're up on top of the east side of the building. By the way, about an acre and a half under roof. That's a little bit of the outside, the top side. Why don't we pop inside, here we go. So the entire building is about 100,000 square feet. Phase one will take about 30,000 square feet. So I want to show you what will be our auditorium. We might take a peek and see if we can look at those 127 year old walls. But you're gonna have to look with eyes of faith because it looks like a labyrinth in here, but when we're done with it, it's going gonna be an amazing phase one campus. So let's pop inside. Okay, so we're inside this old garage and when we're done, we'll blow out all of these walls and the columns and beams will be left, but when we're done recreating it we'll have about a thousand seat auditorium in this space.

So I'm standing on what will be our future stage, will preach from right about here. You know, the Prophet Isaiah said that you will be called a repairer of broken walls. We'd always believed that that's part of our destiny as a church. It's how we turned a crack house into a coffee house. That's how we took an old apartment building, turned it into a dream center. And this car barn is

going to be a place where God gets worshiped, glorified, and can't wait for us to gather in this space at some point in 2019. And we're gonna see a lot of people come to faith in this space. God's going to do some incredible things here. And so I wanted to make sure that you saw it before we repaired those broken wall. Okay, so one last stop. We're in the spot where the east side and west side meet, so east side 1891 west side 1909. We're going to take a peek and see if we can find that 127 year old wall. Here we go. [Pastor Mark uses a sledge hammer on a wall] There it is.

[End of video]

Come on. Can we praise God?

We are in the middle of a miracle and here's what's so fun about that. Some of you are new to NCC, you've heard about turning a crack house into a coffee house or that abandoned apartment building into a DC Dream Center. Guess what? You get to be a part of this one. So excited about where God is taking, I'll be honest though, I got a little tired taking that tour all over again. It is a big building. This weekend I want to cast vision for our next chapter as the church, but Winston Churchill said the farther backwards you look the further forward you are likely to see, and so before we look ahead, let me just peek over our shoulder for a minute.

On a rainy night in March of 1791, a Frenchman named Pierre Charles L'Enfant arrived in the newly designated capital city; it wasn't named Washington yet, not until a little bit later that year. L'Enfant had been commissioned by George Washington to survey the area and design a capital city. 18 days later, he produced a plan. Now, not unlike Nehemiah's bold vision to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. L'Enfant envisioned broad boulevards like Paris and a system of canals like Venice, fun fact until 1931 Constitution Avenue was a canal. In fact, if you drive by 17th and Constitution, you'll see this old stone building; looks a little bit out of place. It was the lock keeper's house. You could take a boat all the way down to C and O Canal connects with the Washington city Canal and park your boat at the Capitol. In 1800 the population of Washington was 14,093 people; of that population 3,244 were slaves. I want to talk about that next week. The nation's capital was built on a swamp; it was surrounded by farmland. To be honest, not many people could see what L'Enfant saw, but George Washington could and I'll tell you why, before he was General Washington or President Washington, he was a surveyor; his eye was trained to not just see what was but to see what could be.

In 1816 the ambassador from Portugal arrived in Washington and he called it the city of magnificent distances. L'Enfant would have considered it a compliment. Our capital was slow to grow, but by 1860 population was 61,122 residents and that growth presented a problem. Our transit system consisted of one line of horse drawn carriages. Well the next year, civil war begins a 125,000 union troop's camp in the capital region and they've got to transport troops. They've got to transport munitions and so in 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed the law establishing the Washington and Georgetown Railroad Company, the same company that would buy and build the Navy Yard Car Barn. On September 13, 1891, the Sunday Herald announced that a building permit had been granted and it's said that the building would be quote, "the finest structure in the vicinity". For a hundred years streetcars criss-cross this city getting

Washingtonians where they needed to go. The Western terminus was Georgetown, the eastern terminus was the Navy Yard.

I think this is kinda cool; when the streetcars were cable cars, those cables would literally pull those cars all across the city. Almost like a giant garden hose the cables would be on these massive spools and they were powered by steam engine. The longest cable was the Navy Yard cable 31,700 feet, a little more than six miles. Now, on the very last day, a Streetcar Service in this city, a Washington Post reporter, Jack Eisen said this, 'the streetcar decided where we could live and where we would shop; it gave shape to the city'. In the 1960's and 70's that car barn would become the place where the Department of Labor would office while its headquarters was being built. In 1988, it would be painted blue earning its nickname, the Blue Castle. In the 2000's, it incubated a number of charter schools including Kipp DC, but for most of its history from 1891 to 1962, it was the last stop on the street car line, it was the turnaround. It was a place where street cars were repaired and rerouted all across this city.

Could I be bold enough to believe that when we rebuild these walls, that car barn will once again be what it once was 'the turnaround'? Our legacy is not a piece of property. Our legacy is changed lives. That car barn has told lots of stories over 127 years if those walls could talk. But guess what? We get to write the next chapter.

If you have a Bible I want to invite you to turn to the book of Nehemiah. We continue this three part series called House of Heroes. Last weekend I gave us a theology of the city, and if you missed that message, it lays the foundation for the vision that I want to cast this weekend, and so I wanna encourage you to check out that podcast.

141 years before Nehemiah rebuilds the wall of Jerusalem the Prophet Jeremiah gives the Jewish exiles living in Babylon a comprehensive plan for their city, and it's counterintuitive. He does not counsel a coup d'état he tells them to... Do you remember this, build houses and plant gardens. In other words, don't rent the city, put down roots, play the long game. The way we like to say that here at NCC is dream big, pray hard and think long. Then Jeremiah says, seek the peace and prosperity of the city where I have called you into exile. Listen, our vision is bigger than building a church. Our vision is to bless this city to the third generation. We want to do things that will make a difference seventy years from now. When we do Second Saturday Serve or Easter Extravaganza, when we host the Living Room for our friends experiencing homelessness or we're resettling refugees, when we turn a crack house into a coffee house, an abandoned apartment building into DC dream center. What are we doing? We are seeking the peace and prosperity of our city.

Can I share a little win? Last weekend we shared that dream box with you and we made 100 boxes and guess what? 100 people join that Dream Team this week, so we need to make some more. But thank you for being a part of that vision and listen, we're investing in the future of this city when we invest in those kids.

So the Prophet Jeremiah says, seek the peace and prosperity of the city. That's our agenda. Then he says, pray to the Lord for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper. That's where we left off last week and that's where we're going to pick it up this week.

The wall of Jerusalem is in ruins. God puts a passion in the heart of Nehemiah. He's totally unqualified. I love it because God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called. He uses this cup bearer from Babylon to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in 52 days flat. How? Listen, he pursues a God ordained passion. Last week we talked about what makes you mad or sad or glad. You need to pay attention to those emotions because maybe God is putting those passions in your heart to pursue. I love what Nehemiah does next, he prays for favor and that's where we pick it up.

Nehemiah chapter one, verse four,

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

⁵ Then I said: "LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.

Verse Eleven,

¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

And here's the key part of this prayer

Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of the king.

I love everything about this prayer. I love how honest it is. I love the way Nehemiah, it's all about the character of God. Can I tell you something? You don't have to remind God of who he is, but you need to remind yourself, he's the God of Heaven. He's the great and awesome God. He is the God who keeps his covenant.

Before we parse this prayer, two observations. First, God-size visions don't happen overnight. Nehemiah gets this vision in the month of Kislev, it's the ninth month in the Hebrew calendar, it's autumn, but he doesn't cast this vision to the king until spring of the following year. What is he doing during that season? Well, he is praying and fasting. Let me give you a little formula; praying plus fasting equals favor. If you want God to do something beyond your ability, here's an idea; try praying and fasting. Listen, you can call it old school; there's no school like the old school.

In August of 1996 I'm doing devotions in the church office, which is a spare bedroom in our Capitol Hill row house and I'm reading Joshua 1:3, "I will give you every where you set your foot" and something happens. Spirit of God, it stirs my spirit, it jumps off the page into my spirit and I feel this prompting to pray a perimeter around Capitol Hill. Listen, our average attendance in August, I think was like 17 people. I remember our income that month, which was \$2,000 and I'm... Listen, we did not have a multi-site vision. We had a dream of one location and we thought if we could just make it one more week, but God prompts this promise and I do a 4.7 mile prayer

walk around Capitol Hill. I was not praying for property I was praying for people. I was praying God, let your kingdom come and your will be done on Capitol Hill as it is in heaven. And so I pray this perimeter and nothing happens at first, but even when your eyes can't see evidence of God at work, I promise you this, God is watching over his word to perform it and the God who began a good work will carry it to completion. Twenty-two years later, we own six properties right on that prayer circle. This is no coincidence, this is providence. The northwest corner of that prayer circle, Ebenezers Coffeehouse, the southeast corner of that prayer circle the Navy Yard Car Barn. Can I be honest? In 2014, I did not have a category for a city block. I had faith, but not that much faith.

Let me tell you two things I've learned since then. One, God has blessings for us and categories that we don't even know exist and two, God's vision for this church is bigger than our vision. Why? Because it's not our church, it's his. And Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Why would God give us the city block? I'll tell you why, because he wants us to be a bigger blessing to this city. We're going to steward every square inch for this church, for this city, and for the next generation.

One side note, Walter Wink said, history belongs to the intercessors. We happen to believe that here at NCC, and it would be a sin of omission to build out that campus and not have a prayer room, an upper room where maybe just maybe we would pray around the clock, seven days a week for the city that God has called us to. Listen, we're going to seek the peace and prosperity of this city and we're going to do it by praying for this city. I don't think the turnaround's going to happen overnight, but we will write the history of this city before it happens in that upper room. Do you believe that?

Second observation, there's a sequence here that is significant and it's easy to read right over it. Verse five, then I said, okay, well what was Nehemiah doing before he opened his mouth and began talking? Well, prayer is a two sided coin. One side is talking to God, the other side is listening to God, and if you said Pastor Mark, which one is more important? Easy answer. Listen, we need to hear what God has to say, a more than God needs to hear what we have to say. A prayer is not outlining our agenda to God; prayer is getting into the word of God. Prayer is an awareness of the presence of God and letting God outline his agenda to us. I think we get this backwards and we want God to bless what we're doing. No, God wants us to do what he's blessing. Nehemiah is modeling something here and I think it's called leadership. Leadership is listening. Listen, we live in a city that's quick to speak and slow to listen. James 1:19 says, be quick to listen and slow to speak. And I think that applies to prayer. I want you to hear this. This could be a game changer. Nehemiah doesn't start praying by talking. Huh! There's an idea. Nehemiah starts praying by listening. Listen, our prayers would be so much more powerful. Our prayers would be so much more on point if we wouldn't start praying by talking, but we actually start praying by listening. Come on!

I had a moment this week; I'm going to talk more about it during our next series. Lora and I flew to Florida this week to meet with a group of pastors who have a heart for racial reconciliation. All of us, thanks to Lora read Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson. Listen, that book messed me up. I have not read a book that has made me cry the way that book did in a long time and I'll tell you why, because it's so easy for someone like me who has experienced white privilege their entire

life. Talk about how far we've come. We have a long ways to go and this church needs to lead the way. May God help us model what racial reconciliation looks like. And so I'm sitting in this circle, we're talking, it's raw, it's real. I'm sitting next to a black pastor from Milwaukee that I learned to love in less than 24 hours and we're talking, we're conversing and right in that middle of the meeting like I just, man, I love this bold leadership. He said, can we just stop and listen? Can we take 90 seconds and try to discern what God is saying to us. And the room goes silent, and when I opened my eyes, there's not a dry eye in the circle. I know I had tears in my eyes. Why? Because we stopped long enough to listen to hear the heart of God, we need to hear the heart of God. We need to talk a little less. We need to listen a little more. God gave us two ears, one ear we need to keep to the air. We need to hear that still small voice of the spirit, so we hear God's heart. The other ear, we need to keep to the ground. We need to listen to each other.

I'm going to cast some vision for our church. Do you know what, the first thing we need to do is listen, let's call it a listening tour, this is a critical juncture. Listen, we need to know what you're thinking, what you're feeling, what you're sensing, what's your dreaming? Listen, don't be surprised if a campus pastor or someone else reaches out to you and if they don't listen, we are all ears. Why? Because the miracle is in house, we need your voice, we need all hands on deck and we want to hear what you're saying. It wasn't just the residents of Jerusalem who rebuilt the wall in Jerusalem. They came from Tekoa and Jericho and Gibeon and Mizpah. Listen, we can't do this without all of our campuses coming together. This is all for one and one for all.

Verse 11; *Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of the king.*

God answers this prayer in some strange and mysterious ways. And you know what? We've experienced that here at NCC. Did you know an investment firm offered cash for that Blue Castle? But we got the contract. Listen, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I think it's the favor of God. And this whole thing is going to require the favor of God from start to finish, and that's why we're going to pray like it depends on God and work like it depends on us.

Now, let me switch gears. Nehemiah pursued a god ordained passion. Nehemiah prayed for favor and chapter two, Nehemiah examines the wall.

Chapter two, verse 11. *So I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later*

I called a press conference. No, that's not what it says.

*Three days later*¹² *I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. Come on guys. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.*

¹³ *By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal^[a] Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem,*

Verse Fifteen. ¹⁵ *Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.*

¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." And so they began this good work.

We purchased this property four years ago. Honestly, we haven't said much about it. No press conferences per se. Why? Because again, we knew we had tenants until August of 2018, but we were doing what Nehemiah did. We were examining those walls. This weekend I feel a little bit like Nehemiah coming back in through that valley gate, getting ready to cast the vision. You know what? I think he had a holy confidence because I think he knew that this vision was from God. But he was a little nervous too because you know what I forget who said this, but if you're leading and no one's following you, you're taking a walk. I think he knew, you know you can't pull this off. I think that's where we are as a church. Listen, I have no doubt that this is promised land, I believe that this vision is from God, but it's going to take all seven of our campuses and so I'm here to say this weekend, come let us rebuild this wall. I've talked about the gracious hand of God on us and you know what? It's time.

It's time to begin this good work and so let me give you a three phase plan. We're going to put it up on the screen at our campuses so you can see it. Phase one is yellow. We'll build out about 30,000 square feet. It will be our new Capitol Hill campus, but here's the irony. It actually sits at the intersection of historic Capitol Hill, the Navy Yard, and the Riverfront. By the way, Riverfront, fastest growing community in DC. Thousands of people are going to move into the Riverfront over the next couple of years and guess what? We're going to be ready to love them and serve them and bless them. And so, phase one will include a thousand seat event venue. It will be used during the week, concerts, conferences, other things, but it's not a thousand seats, it is a thousand souls, not about seating capacity, about sending capacity. Again, our legacy, not a piece of property, our legacy is changed lives. This campus, it's going to be a prototype and the growth of this campus will fuel and fund our other campuses and what God wants to do again and again.

A couple of fun facts, the women's bathrooms going to have 12 stalls. Can I get a Hallelujah? The lobby will be larger than 400 square feet. In fact, it will be larger than the Miracle Theater. Why? Because we don't think turnarounds just happen in a service. I think they can happen during a conversation over a cup of coffee after that service. Now, it's tough to predict timeline, and I know I'm on the record now. I do not want to over promise and under deliver. There are factors we cannot control. So, I'm just going to tell you what our contractor is telling us. They believe that they can get us into phase one by Easter of 2019. That seems crazy to me. And we don't even have a building permit yet. But remember that prayer for favor? Let's be doing that. But you know what? We're going to pray like it depends on God, we're going to work like it

depends on us and if we don't get in by Easter guess when we're going to get in - after Easter. Okay? Phase one we estimate will cost about \$8,000,000.

Let me talk about phase two, light blue. Its 20,000 square feet of ministry space for our kids. You know this, I think five, six years ago we had about a hundred kids. We've now got five or 600 kids. What are you doing? And so we want to listen, we want to bless this city to the third generation. How do you do that? I think you disciple your kids. It'll double as a child development center Monday to Friday. Phase two, we will begin before phase one delivers, but we're hoping that a phase two will then deliver maybe by the end of 2019. Again, we're holding these things a little loosely. Guessing that phase two will cost about \$4 million, but talk about compound interest.

Let me take a minute and talk about phase three. It is dark blue, and by the way, the orange is kind of a main street. We're going to open up those old streetcar entrances if historic preservation will let us do that and we'll have a little main street. But phase three will primarily be a marketplace. The green is an Ebenezer's 2.0. Do we have this all figured out? No. In fact, this week I was in Tampa. I visited Armature Works because I wanted to see their marketplace, their event venue, their co-working space, picked up a few ideas.

Here's what I know for sure. We have three core convictions as a church. The church ought to be the most creative place on the planet, church belongs in the middle of the marketplace, and God is gonna bless us in proportion how we give to missions and care for the poor in our city. Can I tell you that I believe 770 M Street is where those three core convictions converge. This is going to take next level creativity. It's learning new business models, turning them into business as mission, just like we did with Ebenezer's. This is middle of the marketplace. We're talking about creating a place that's 20 times larger than Ebenezer; 20 times larger than the Miracle Theater. The footprint of the east side, by the way, it's a little bit larger than Union Market, ceilings are a little bit higher and we have two levels, not one.

Well, how is this a win for the poor in our city? How does this fund missions? We need to wrestle with this question and I want us to understand the values that are driving this vision. I don't think there's a church in America that has done what we're attempting to do, at least on this scale. If we get this right, we don't just create a prototype for future campuses, I think we create a prototype for the urban church. Listen, church as usual, is not going to get us where we need to go, not with the cost of real estate in urban areas. Listen, I don't think we can build spaces that get used one or two days a week. The good news there are ways of doing church that no one has thought of yet.

Last week, talked about four ways of engaging culture. We can mindlessly consume, we can pompously condemn, we can lazily copy or we can conscientiously create. Made it easy with the adjectives. Listen, if we're serious about following Christ, about seeing God's kingdom come, there is only one option and it is to conscientiously create. Well, what does that look like when it comes to this city block? Well, we don't want to build something that's part of the gentrification

problem in our city that marginalizes people further and just widens these socioeconomic gaps that already exist. Listen, we will create a place where church and community cross paths. We will create a place where every penny of profit goes to kingdom causes, but I think we can do more than that. I think we can incubate entrepreneurs. I think we can create some business as mission models and guess what? I think we're going to create hundreds of jobs. So the question is who are we going to employ? Well, I'll tell you what, after reading Just Mercy, I'll tell you who I want to employ. I want to employ people that have the hardest time getting a job, returning citizens. I would love to see us employ some veterans and some refugees and you know what I think? I bet there are some kids who are over at our Dream Center their first job is going to be in this marketplace.

I hope you're picking up what I'm throwing down and I want you to hear my heart today. We do not have all the answers, but when the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt, it protected everyone. The priests, the peasants, perfume makers, even Jewish pilgrims who only came three times a year. We want to conscientiously recreate this car barn so that it is, once again a turnaround.

I want to invite our worship teams at all of our campuses to come. You guys have been great. I know I'm talking fast. Last week, this week I'm going to be talking fast next week because there's a lot of vision to cast. But I want to invite our teams to come. We're going to sing this song, Spirit Breakout, and I want to end on this note. I want you to hear this. Listen, God does not dwell in temples built by human hands. The spirit of God fills these human temples, and when he does, we become the ministers of reconciliation. We become the vessels through which God blesses our city, and so may the spirit of God come and fill us up and send us out. In Jesus' name, Amen.