

Restoring the Harbor

Nehemiah 2:1-6, 11-18

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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It has been one year since I preached my first sermon as your pastor. That sermon used the image of a harbor to describe the church. What do we look for in a safe harbor? I played with the letters S-A-F-E. We look for shelter, for accurate information, for fun, and for equipment for the journey.

This year I want to use the image of restoring the harbor. It's been happening off and on—mostly off—since last fall: the pounding in the harbor, the removal of old wood, and the disappointment that everything seemed to be on hold. We are in a season at Harbor Church of thinking about renewing and rebuilding the church—not just the building, but the church itself, including her ministries and her spiritual life. On the occasion of my first anniversary I'd like to turn your thoughts to this process of restoration and revival.

The classic biblical story about rebuilding is the story of Nehemiah. If you didn't quite catch the context when we read from chapter 2 earlier, let me remind you. The story takes place more than 400 years after the time of David. The nation of Israel long ago went into a decline and divided in a civil war. The northern part of the country fell to the Assyrian empire, but the southern part, called Judah, survived, along with the capital city Jerusalem. But the cultural decline was not reversed. The true religion of Moses and David had been corrupted by the cultures of their geographic neighbors and by the values of the dominant empires of the day. Eventually Jerusalem itself fell to the Babylonians. Their way of making sure that the nation would die was to take not only the rulers but the intellectuals and the religious elite back to Babylon for re-education. Their young men would be raised to serve the empire.

Nehemiah had seen the destruction of his capital city and the decimation of its population. But he had also seen change as the empire of the Babylonians (today, the Iraqis) gave way to the empire of the Persians (the Iranians). The Jews understood this as God's hand at work in history, because the Persians had a more enlightened view of empire and preferred to tax a prosperous Judah rather than to keep it a pile of rubble. Nehemiah, a Jew, had been so acculturated that he had been hired to serve in the royal court, as the cupbearer to the king. This was a position of considerable trust. I assume it was like the guy in the movies who sips the wine for Pharaoh or Caesar to be sure it isn't poison. He's there with the king all the time.

Nehemiah has a conversation with people who have recently traveled back to Jerusalem and asks how things are back in the homeland. The report is bleak. The walls are down. The gates have been burned. Without a wall and gates you didn't have a city in ancient times. It's all gone. It's all Ground Zero. So Nehemiah is sad. The Persian king notices that he is depressed and asks why. Because the destruction of Jerusalem was not the fault of the Persians, and because Nehemiah is praying all the time that he is talking to the king, he tells the king why he is sad. The king asks, amazingly, "What do you want to do?" "I want to rebuild it," is the reply. The king gives permission, a guarantee of safe passage, and supplies for rebuilding. This is a kind of miracle, an answer to prayer. The rest of the book tells how Nehemiah faced opposition immediately, how they dealt with exhaustion and guerilla attacks on the volunteer workers, how he delegated the work effectively, and how he constantly encouraged the people. It's a quick course in leadership as well as a carefully documented story from history.

Thousands and thousands of pastors over the years have used the story of Nehemiah to get people thinking about how their churches could rebuild. I wonder if the pastors of Harbor Church in the 1940's—after fire destroyed the building—used the story to tell people they could rebuild. But we find ourselves in a different situation. We do not have a city or a church in ruins. We have a church whose ministries went through a period of decline, reaching few children and young adults, having less influence in the community, and—while improvements have been made to the building in recent years—the third floor and basement fell into disuse and disrepair. Now some among us have noticed the decline and become sad-faced like Nehemiah.

But others have moved past the sad faces as they have heard God asking like the Persian king, “What do you want to do?” For some, the answer is, “I want to rebuild.” Some of the things we have done over the past year—the summer Rec Center for youth, Vacation Bible School, year-round Sunday School for all ages, Soup and Song, adult study groups, and the architect's analysis of the building—were all done in the spirit of rebuilding. And next Sunday we will begin the process of considering some serious, *literal* rebuilding of the third floor. What do you want to do? I look forward to hearing your answers in our brainstorming session.

But I think I have found an even better parable for the restoration of Harbor Church than the story of Nehemiah. That is the parable taking place down the hill from us—the restoration of Old Harbor. We have all been witness to the approval of a plan to put in new docks, to dredge the harbor, to add a harbormaster's house and new restrooms. And we have all seen how it started and then stopped, because of unexpected complications. I'm sure that it will get restarted soon and I'm looking forward to watching the progress. It seems to me that the story of Old Harbor suggests four steps we need to keep in mind as we restore Harbor Church.

Step One: Remove anything toxic that is buried. When the crews began digging in Old Harbor they found evidence of dirt contaminated, they think, by an old fueling station that no one quite remembers with any accuracy. Something that was long buried turned out to be a problem. When you bury something it doesn't completely go away. Oh, our bodies turn to soil over time, but toxic things that are buried with us—whether chemicals or emotions—can leave a residue behind for generations.

Churches can have toxic substances in their histories. There may be stories of meanness or unforgiveness or treating pastors badly or turning selfish as a church. You can decide not to talk about those things, but they don't go away. I do not know what lies buried at Harbor Church, and I certainly don't know what lies buried in your own heart. What I *do* know is that if a church is going to be restored and revived, anything that is toxic needs to be dealt with.

Here's an example some of you may recall from Henry Blackaby's book *Experiencing God*. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, back in the '60's, there was a small Baptist church in which not a whole lot was happening. They had a pastor who longed for revival, and Henry happened to be a friend of his. But no matter how much they prayed and worked nothing really changed at that church. There were two brothers in the church, Sam and Arnold, who were both lay leaders in the church. They had been feuding for thirteen years. They hadn't spoken for two years. They put on a good front so that most people in church were unaware of this, but the fact was that they always sat on opposite sides of the church and avoided each other. The pastor became convinced that this broken relationship in the church family was preventing the Holy Spirit from moving. He met with each of the brothers and told them so. He asked them to pray about it and the pastor prayed that the Spirit would convict them of the sin of failing to reconcile, because it was hurting the whole body. As the church began revival services, Sam and Arnold responded to the

invitation. The two brothers who had not spoken in two years walked down separate aisles and met at the front of the church and embraced in tears and forgave each other.

And here's the rest of the story. That very night a revival broke out in that church. That is, dozens of people were moved by the Spirit to make new commitments and to be reconciled in their own broken relationships. The next night they had to move from the little Baptist church to an Episcopal church that seated twice as many. The next night they moved to an Alliance church that seated twice that. People were coming from all over the community. The next night they had to move to the United Church of Canada that seated 1,000, the largest church in Saskatoon. The next night they had to move to the municipal auditorium that seated 1,500, and this revival spread all over Western Canada, and then to other parts of the world. All because this buried anger between two brothers was surfaced and dealt with.

This week we saw the movie *Get Low* starring Robert Duvall as a hermit who has lived alone outside town, basically not speaking to anyone for 40 years. He goes to the local funeral director, Bill Murray, and tells him he wants to have a funeral party for himself and have everyone come tell stories they've heard about him, such as that he murdered various people, so he can hear them for himself. In the end, though, it is the hermit who wants to tell his own story. He is so ashamed of something he did 40 years ago that he has been unable to leave his home. But now he needs to ask the whole town for forgiveness. He calls the funeral his "get-out-of-jail" party, but he can only get out of the jail he has built for himself by dealing with a tragedy he has buried for 40 years.

You might be in that same situation. This church might have things buried for 40 years, or longer. The only way to move forward in restoring the harbor is to dig that toxic stuff up and remove it—and in the church that means removing it by *forgiving* it.

Step Two: Make the harbor deeper. Any harbor will fill up with stuff over the years and become shallow. Every few years they have to dredge out Old Harbor. You can see that the beach is trying to reclaim it beside the breaker and the rest of the harbor is no doubt full of silt. The same thing happens to churches. If you just leave them alone, if people keep doing the same thing year after year, churches will become shallow. What once had meaning will become something we do because we do it. The importance of the church as an institution will always overtake the importance of a relationship with God unless you are very intentional about spiritual life. It is a law of human nature that religious experience turns into institutions and then dies. The Spirit has to come every few years and shake up the institution and bring a return to experience in order to preserve life in the church. That is what historians call revival.

It's often said that American Christianity is a mile wide and an inch deep. An article in *Harpers* five years ago dealt with the paradox of a Christian America in which only four in ten Americans can name even half the Ten Commandments, and only half can name even one of the gospels. Three-fourths of Americans believe that the Bible teaches "God helps those who help themselves"—a proverb that comes from Ben Franklin and not the Bible. This has been the situation in America for my whole lifetime. Historian Tom Askew noted, "Historians and sociologists have commented on the shallowness of personal commitment that accompanied much of the post-World War II religious resurgence. Church membership could mean little more than respectability and belief in the American way of life."

That's what we are up against, and what we are tempted by at Harbor Church. You can argue that in order to include the most people we should believe almost nothing. But that would be a mistake—first because we would miss God, and second because what the younger generations are looking for is not a social institution but an experience of God. We have not lost

them because we believed too much. We have lost them because they did not find God here and they went looking for God in other kinds of spiritual experiences.

We can't rewind the clock, and I don't believe it is helpful to kick out church members who don't seem to us to be serious about their faith. But what we *can* do it to create an expectation that church members are to be disciples of Jesus—students of his way of life who want to be like him. And we can offer opportunities like the classes we have on Sunday morning and Thursday night to help people deepen their spiritual lives. The pastor can make himself available as a spiritual coach. We can encourage the formation of new groups within the church with a spiritual focus—prayer groups, study groups, meditation groups—even groups of two or three people committed to going deeper. There's no point in having a harbor that is not deep enough to accommodate our questions.

Third step: Build new facilities. Obviously the Old Harbor project will soon move from digging up and dredging to rebuilding. We need to improve our facilities at Harbor Church—but with spiritual ends in mind. That's why we're going to dream together, to do something not just because we hate to see space sit empty but because God has given us a sense of purpose.

It is not true in church life that “if you build it they will come.” There are way too many empty church buildings in America for that to be true, and a good many of them are new church plants built on that model. At the same time, it *is* true that if you don't have space to accommodate the people who do come, they won't come back. And there are some programs that require adequate space before you can carry them out.

There is another intangible: the condition of your building represents to the world the condition of your spiritual life. It might not be an accurate picture, but it is often seen that way. That's part of what is going on in Nehemiah's story, as Yahweh's reputation is at stake in the condition of Jerusalem. If paint is flaking off the church building, people wonder how passionate we are about God's glory. That's why the trustees are getting bids right now. If the basement is left uncared for, the youth start to assume that nobody much cares about them. That's why we fixed it up this summer. Of course, if you spend all your money on your building and lavishly decorate it, people will understand that you have sold out to keeping up with the Joneses and are serving Mammon instead of Jesus. Everything we do or don't do about the building has a spiritual dimension, so we ought to pray about it. We ought to go deep before we go up.

The fourth step: Spread the word. If we restore Harbor Church—spiritually and physically—it will not mean much to Block Island if we keep it to ourselves. If good things happen here, we need to tell our neighbors. There needs to be buzz on the island—not only about new programs or the kind-of-new pastor, but about Jesus. I promise I'll finally get the church web site up. I'll keep sending stuff to the *Block Island Times*. But the word that really matters is yours. Your word-of-mouth is the way God has designed churches to grow.

I don't know about you, but I've had a great first year. Becca and I love it here, and we love you. And we are tremendously excited about what can happen in the year ahead. God wants to restore this harbor; he wants to make it deeper and wider, and he wants to fill it with the kind of life we have yet to imagine.