This morning we continue our journey through the book of Nehemiah, and his leading of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And in today’s passage we see Nehemiah moving things along to the point of starting the rebuilding efforts.

If you’re going to build something, one of the first things you need to do is gather some information about the current situation. This is true whether you’re building a house, building a new life or new future, or building a football team that you want to repeat as Super Bowl Champions. You have to assess things as they currently are before you can start building.

I’ve mentioned a couple times in the last few weeks that I have been building something at our house lately. We’ve converted our one car garage into living space, because we simply needed more space than we had. The project is almost done – I’m down to one closet door, a shower door, a few pieces of trim, some paint, the roof, some walls, the insulation, and the foundation. “Almost done” as I said. Ok…just kidding. Just the closet door, shower door and painting some trim. But there was a very important part of this project that no one will ever see, and it happened at the very start. The first things I did was assess the situation and gather some information about the garage. I brought in an architect and a builder to find out what we could do. We looked at the foundation and the walls and the electrical stuff. We talked about what we hoped to do with the space, and what it would take to get there given what we currently had with the garage. That was back in late summer or so.

That information gathering laid the groundwork for the conversion of our garage to a bonus room with a small bathroom. **But if that initial assessment of the lay of the land had not happened, it would have been very difficult going forward with the plans we wanted to carry out.**

We see the same thing with Nehemiah in this morning's passage. He gathers information before going public with his building plans. The timing of sharing a vision, of sharing a God-inspired plan, is crucial, and Nehemiah
demonstrates this.

We continue the events from last week with these words, “I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men” (Nehemiah 2:11-12). Right off the bat, Nehemiah is modeling for us Biblical living, and Biblical principles for getting a job done: He takes a three-day vacation. I sound like I’m being facetious, but I’m not. He arrives in Jerusalem, the city he's coming to lead a rebuilding effort of, and the first thing he does when he gets there is to take a three day break.

This is totally contrary to the fast-paced, high-energy, always working, never take a break mentality of our culture. Nowadays, people go on vacation and they got their phones and tablets and laptops and too many vacations are working vacations. We can't get away from work. According to one human resources website, American workers, on average, leave three days of vacation unused, each year.¹ I’ve been guilty of that. I’ve often not taken advantage of all my vacation days in the course of a year. We don't take breaks very well.

But Nehemiah shows us that: Before launching into a rebuilding project of any kind, a period of rest would suit us well. We need to be ready for the work ahead of us. So he arrives in Jerusalem, and the first thing he does is get recharged for three days.

After this three-day weekend he goes out under the cover of darkness. But he hasn't yet revealed to anyone the plan that's in his heart and in his head. God has given Nehemiah a vision for a new future, but no one knows about it yet.

You know, so often, people promise change, or announce so-called plans for change, without having really thought it through. They don't really know what's broken, they don't know how to fix it, and they don't have the pieces in place to bring about meaningful, long-lasting, purposeful change. And let's be honest, we all get tired about hearing of the next big thing, when each big thing just kind of fizzles out. How many times have we seen ads promise all the results of spending hours in the gym but only required some 10 or 15

¹ http://hr.blr.com/news.aspx?id=15480
minutes a day?

Those kinds of announcements for change, for fixing a problem, are not thought out very well. (Or maybe they're thought out really well, and they know they're selling a false bill of goods.) Either way, we get tired of it. It's like the boy who cried wolf: eventually we don't believe the voice anymore. Nehemiah doesn't want to be that kind of leader. **Nehemiah wants to be able to deliver on his promise when he announces that Jerusalem is broken and he's got a plan to fix it.** And so he waits to announce the plan until he's done his homework. And some of that is going out and inspecting the walls of Jerusalem.

Now, there's sort of a Mission Impossible kind of thing going on here. In the darkness of night, on a secret mission with just a few other people, he's out scouting around, inspecting the city. He has to find out first hand what exactly the condition of the city is so he knows what to communicate to the people. So he checks out the various neighborhoods, and the wall and gates that are around and near these various areas. **He assesses the city.**

I did some of that same kind of work before coming here to Kirkland. I didn't visit the church or the city in the middle of the night or anything like that, but in addition to the normal interview kinds of things, I did plenty of research on the Internet about RHPC through the church website and through our denomination's website and the statistics that are reported there by RHPC, as well as look up all kinds of information on the city of Kirkland. I was able to get an understanding of this church, it’s ministries, and the trends of the church in terms of certain statistics that are reported, such as Sunday worship attendance, membership, Sunday school participation, age demographics, and so forth, as well as gain an understanding of the community around us: its diversity, the kinds of people who live here, the schools, and so forth. That was all in addition to what I learned through conversations with people in the interview process. We have talked about some of these things a few times before, and many of you are familiar with the lay of the land here at Rose Hill and in Kirkland, so I won't go into the actual information again today.

But that process is the kind of thing that Nehemiah did. He went to scope out
the lay of the land, to see what he had to work with. It’s an important and foundational piece to any rebuilding effort, because where you are now impacts how you start and what you need to do. Building a relationship between two people who just met for the first time is a lot different than rebuilding a relationship that has 20 or 40 years of history. Building a city that lies in ruins is a lot different than building one that’s going strong and is looking to expand. Building a church from scratch is different than building one up with 60 or 70 years of history. Understanding the current situation is important.

So Nehemiah does that kind of work under the cloak of darkness, in addition to the initial report he got when he was back in the King’s palace, which we read about in the early part of chapter one. So, after this night time mission, he takes things public, when he records for us in verses 17 and 18, “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.' I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me” (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

These verses are the crux of the events here. And in this little speech of Nehemiah’s, there are three key things for us to take away. For anyone who’s in leadership in any capacity where a new and better future is desired than what the current situation is – at work, in a family, in a church, for yourself, wherever – these three points are crucial. First, he identifies the problem: Jerusalem lies in ruins. He didn’t need to do much on that front, because the people already recognize the problem – He says that they see the trouble. Jerusalem lies in ruins, the gates are burned, and so forth. So this is a problem. It’s not always the case that everyone sees the problem. Sometimes, eyes need to be opened (our own, or others). But here, they saw it. Second, he offers a solution: to rebuild the wall. This is the vision casting and offering a solution to the problem. This is painting the picture of a different future where the problem is solved and life is better than it is now. And then third, he gives them a reason why they should do this now: because then they will no longer be in disgrace. They won’t be the laughing stock of the region. It will be an opportunity to live out their faith and shine the light of
the Lord into the world around them with confidence and courage. And in this, he assures them that they can turn things around, because God is clearly on their side. Things are already happening that indicate God is on the move, doing a new thing in their midst, and the disgrace is already beginning to be left behind.

So Nehemiah gives this little speech where he throws out a bold idea to rebuild the wall. Think about this. It’s been 140 years or so. They’ve lived with it as it is that long. It would have been very easy to laugh at Nehemiah’s idea. Too often we’re just comfortable with the status quo, aren’t we – even when the status quo isn’t what we’d really like or isn’t really all that great? And it would not have surprised me if the response from the people had been one of comfort with their situation – “we kind of like the broken wall!” – and no rebuilding effort had happened. But then in the second half of verse 18 we read, “They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work” (Nehemiah 2:18). The people respond favorably!

All of Nehemiah's praying, planning, scouting around, formulating things in his head...all of it pays off when the people say, “Let's do this.” On your mark, get set, go! And in chapter 3 Nehemiah talks about who did what parts of the rebuilding...and it was a massive undertaking. But they came together and they rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, and ultimately the city, no longer in disgrace, but shining brightly for God.

Let’s bring this back to our situation here at Rose Hill. If I were to take Nehemiah’s words of his little speech in verses 17 and 18, and paraphrase them for us, it would be something like this: “You see the challenges before us. You know that our church is not now what it once was or what we believe God is calling us to be. It’s not in ruins with burned gates – that happened quite literally in 1974 – but we’ve got some challenges. We have some areas of ministry to intentionally focus on and pour ourselves into as God pours his Spirit into us. And we can do this. God has blessed our church before in times of challenge...there’s a track record of God leading us through challenging times to the promised land...and His hand of grace will continue to be on us as we move forward.”
Now, we need to remember that besides my own scouting around and assessment of the landscape before coming as pastor, you all did the same thing, in the Mission Study process. That was a chance to take a pause about 4 years ago, and assess the situation at Rose Hill and share what some of your hopes and dreams were for the future, to share what you all believed God was calling our church to be and do. That resulted in a 53-page document called the Mission Study Report. In that mission study done by the congregation, you implicitly and explicitly identified some of areas of the church that you observed seemed to be broken and burned; that just weren’t living up to their potential. Mostly, you all identified your hopes and dreams and what you believed God wanted our church to be. There are a lot of statements in that report about how certain ministries used to be a certain way. Things like, “I remember when…” and then it’s followed by a fond memory of a ministry, or a certain facet of the church that’s no longer there, or some kind of desire to see the previous level of energy and enthusiasm around something come back. That’s all great stuff. That’s the kind of assessment that churches need to do more frequently.

Then, this past spring, the Session of our church appointed a task force to come up with plans for how we can live into that future that the people of Rose Hill believe God is leading us into. It’s one thing to assess a situation and say, “this isn’t right. I remember when it was better, and I think God is calling us to raise the bar today.” It’s something else to say, “What needs to be addressed to get there? What are some specific facets of our church God is calling us to address?” So this task force looked at the Mission Study report, plus talked with some different people, plus we threw in our own prayerful assessments and sense of God’s leading, and we came up with six areas of ministry that we believe, if we focus on them and build them up, that we will build Rose Hill into the place that God is calling it to be. The session looked at the task force report and adopted it this past fall. So, the fruit of this is sort of equivalent to Nehemiah’s statement in his little speech: “Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem.” These are the parts of the wall that we believe need the most attention here at Rose Hill:

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<tr>
<th>Overall Priority</th>
<th>Ministry Area</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Children &amp; Youth Ministries</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Fellowship</td>
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3 Facilities
4 Worship
5 Adult Discipleship
6 Marketing/Communication

You may have seen these listed before, as this information was shared with the congregation this past fall through one of our monthly Newsletters. You may have also noticed that some of these things are starting to be addressed. Many of them are linked together – worship impacts Children’s and Youth Ministries and vice-versa; Fellowship is impacted by Facilities, and so forth. There is a lot of interdependency between these things; none of them are like silos standing on their own.

Addressing these areas is the big-picture plan adopted by Session. That’s not to say that other facets of the church aren’t important, it’s simply to say that those other areas are stronger. They don’t need the attention that these areas do. Rebuilding the wall will happen as we address these six areas. Good things are already happening. God is moving in our church. Things are already under way. We can say with Nehemiah, “God’s hand of grace has already been upon us.”

But just like they had a long ways to go in that moment when Nehemiah said they should rebuild the wall, so have we got a long ways to go. And like Nehemiah, the ability to live into that future, to see it come to fruition, means the participation of the people. “Let us start rebuilding,” they said to Nehemiah in verse 18. Now it’s our time. We’ve done the assessment. We have a plan. God’s gracious hand has already gotten certain things going. Now it’s time to come together and rebuild so that the light of Christ would shine more brightly through each of us, and our church, into the community around us. I don’t know how long it will take for Rose Hill to be transformed into the multi-generational, energetic church that you all have envisioned. As I said last week, it took 12 years to rebuild Jerusalem. It might take that long here at Rose Hill. Except in rare instances, it’s definitely more akin to a marathon than a sprint. And I can assure you it will take more than just a handful of people. It takes more than a quarterback and a coach and a few other players. It takes the whole team. It takes all of us, coming together in whatever ways God has equipped us to contribute, united by the vision of
rebuilding. We can do this. God’s hand of grace is already putting things in motion. Are you ready? On your mark, get set…let’s pray before we go…..Amen.