

September 2009, *Equipping* #99

## Heritage Sunday 2009

October 25, 2009

### **Introduction:**

These worship resources have been designed to assist Mennonite congregations in planning worship for Heritage Sunday. The focus of this denominationally recognized Sunday is on the spiritual heritage of the church, a heritage of an imperfect past which is nevertheless a gift, as Israel's past was for Nehemiah.

A search for meaning in their new circumstances led the people of Israel to recall their past. To their credit, they did not just recall glorious triumphs, but also failures and disgraces. It is this honesty about their history that led them to truly worship, truly confess, truly address injustices, and truly work together. Reading Nehemiah compels us to ask ourselves a hard question: Can we do the difficult work—the spiritual work—of learning from an imperfect past?

This worship guide has been prepared for Mennonite Church Canada Formation by Laureen Harder-Gissing, Archivist-Librarian at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario/Conrad Grebel University College Library.

**Theme:** *Remembering with Nehemiah: The gift of an imperfect past*

**Scripture Texts:** Nehemiah 1-9; 1 Peter 2:1-5

**Call to Worship/Benediction:** (excerpts from Psalm 90)

**L:** Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations

**P:** From everlasting to everlasting you are God

**L:** For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by

**P:** Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom

**L:** May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children

**P:** May the favour of the Lord rest upon us

**L:** Establish the work of our hands for us

**All: Yes, establish the work of our hands.**

HWB: Hymnal – A Worship Book

*“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. 3:11*

**Invocation:**

O God, we pray to you, the One:  
Who wandered the desert with Moses and Miriam  
Who led Ezra and Nehemiah back to the ruins of a promised land  
Whose son, Jesus, called men and women from ordinary tasks  
Whose Spirit ignited the church  
Who brought us here today.  
Open our hearts to the gift of our history. Amen.

**Hymns:**

HWB 86 *Now thank we all our God*  
HWB 114 *In thee is gladness*  
HWB 363 *Renew your church*  
HWB 367 *For the healing of the nations*  
HWB 26 *Holy Spirit, come with power*  
HWB 226 *You are salt for the earth*

**Prayers:**

HWB 696 *Prayer of Confession*  
HWB 716 *Affirmation of Faith*  
HWB 718 *Prayer of the Church*  
followed by  
HWB 442 *Christ Be With Me*  
HWB 757 *Prayer of Benediction*, or repeat the call to worship.

**Children's Story:**

*Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq* by Mark Alan Stamaty. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, distributed by Random House, 2004.

**Story Notes:**

This is the real-life story of a woman named Alia, who is a librarian in the city of Basra, Iraq. From Biblical times to the present, cultural landmarks have been targets in war. During the first Gulf War, Alia feared for the safety of her city's library. Like Nehemiah, she brought her community together. When everyone did their small part, hope was restored.

Alia's dream did not come true at the end of the story. She is still waiting for her new library. But she has a great feeling of joy because she has found fulfillment in restoring her heritage, working for peace and building community.

Nehemiah's dream did not come true right away either. But he brought people together, and as they worked together and worshipped God together, they found hope, and began to dream again.

**Note:** Check with your local library for copies of *Alia's Mission*. The book is also readily available to purchase online.

**Scripture Readings: Nehemiah 1-9 (see reader's theatre, below); 1 Peter 2:1-5.**

**Nehemiah:** One of my brothers came from Judah and I questioned him about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. He said to me:

**Brother:** Those who survived are in great trouble. The wall of Jerusalem is broken and its gates have been burned.

**Narrator:** When he heard this, Nehemiah sat down and wept. For some days, he mourned and fasted and prayed, and then he said:

**Nehemiah:** O Lord who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself, have committed against you. We have not obeyed the commands you gave your servant Moses. You promised that if we return to you and obey your commands, then even if your exiled people were at the farthest horizon, you will gather them. Give your servant success today by granting me favour in the presence of the king.

**Narrator:** Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. When he took the wine to him, the king asked:

**King:** Why do you look so sad?

**Nehemiah:** I was much afraid, but I said, 'May the king live forever! The city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins.'

**King:** Then what do you want?

**Nehemiah:** If it pleases the king, send me to the city so I can rebuild it.

**Narrator:** And because the gracious hand of God was upon him, the king granted his request. And Nehemiah went to Jerusalem and began to rebuild the wall.

And the people worked with all their heart.

**Eliashib:** I am the high priest, Eliashib. I and my fellow priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate.

**Sons of Hassenaah:** We are the sons of Hassenaah who laid the beams of the Fish Gate.

**Meremoth:** I am Meremoth, son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, and I repaired the next section of the wall.

**Men of Tekoa:** We are the men of Tekoa, who repaired the section after that—no thanks to our nobles who would not put their shoulders to the work!

**Daughters of Shallum:** We are the daughters of Shallum who repaired the section past the Tower of the Ovens.

**Narrator:** Our enemies came to taunt us.

**Sanballat:** (mocking)What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life?

**Tobiah:** (mocking) What they are building, if even a fox climbed up on it, he could break it!  
(they laugh)

Nehemiah: They plotted to stir up trouble against Jerusalem. But we prayed and posted a guard day and night. We worked with one hand, and held a sword in the other. And when it was finished, our enemies were afraid and lost their self-confidence because they realized that our work had been done with the help of our God.

**Narrator:** And now, men and women raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews:

Woman #1: Our sons and daughters are numerous, we are mortgaging our fields, vineyards and homes just to get grain to eat.

Woman #2: We have to subject our children to slavery. Our fellow Jews are enslaving our children!

Nehemiah: When I heard their cry, I was very angry. I accused the nobles. “You are exacting usury from your own countrymen! You are not walking in the fear of God!” And they promised,

Nobles: We will give back their fields, vineyards and homes, and we will not demand anything more from them.

Nehemiah: And the people said,

*All: Amen!*

Narrator: And so on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read from dawn till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate.

Then Nehemiah said,

Nehemiah: This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.

**Narrator:** For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law.

Nehemiah: Go and enjoy food and drink, and send some to those who have none. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

**Narrator:** And on the twenty-fourth day, the people gathered together and confessed their sins, and the sins of their ancestors. They read, and confessed, and worshipped. And then the Levites preached. They said:

Levite #1: Stand up and praise the Lord, who made the heavens and the stars, the earth and the seas and all that is in them.

Levite #2: The Lord chose Abraham and made a covenant with him. The Lord heard the sufferings of our ancestors in Egypt.

Levite #3: The Lord led us through the desert with a pillar of cloud and fire. The Lord sent us commandments from the mountain.

Levite #1: But our ancestors became stiff-necked and refused to listen. They failed to remember the miracles God performed among them.

Levite #2: But God is a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Levite #3: And God did not desert them even when they idolized a golden calf.

Levite #1: God gave to us the Promised Land, but we were disobedient and killed God's prophets.

Levite #2: And we were handed over to our enemies.  
Then God heard our cries, and delivered us.

Levite #3: This happened time and time again.

*All: And once more, O God, we cry to you.*

### **Sermon Notes:**

The larger story of Ezra and Nehemiah is the story of a community at its most fragile times. Injustice assails it from within and without. Its people are preoccupied with survival, yet are also undergoing a time of deep introspection. When given the opportunity, they choose to work "with all their heart." They experience a hunger for worship, confession and redemption which is enviable. (The hymns chosen for this service reflect this longing for renewal.)

Nehemiah is commonly seen as a memoir. Yet the complete story is made up of more than personal reflections. Genealogies, registers, lists, oral tradition, Scripture, and archival documents have all been mined to reconstruct this story. A search for meaning in their new circumstances leads the community to recall its past. To their credit, the people of Israel do not just recall their glorious triumphs, but also their failures and disgraces. It is this honesty about their history that leads them to truly worship, truly confess, truly address injustices, and truly work together.

Yet there is a slender thread running through this story that should give us pause. In renewing their own community, the people begin to draw firm lines between themselves and the "stranger" or "outsider." Purity becomes an overriding concern. Nehemiah calls down curses on those who intermarried (13:23-4), and considers this action a sign of his faithfulness to God.

Remembering the past is no guarantee that a community will automatically achieve God's dream of a just and peaceful world. It should come as no surprise to any of us, if we have any acquaintance with history, that, in times of great peril, a community draws inward. This has happened to us Mennonites, too.

Reading Nehemiah compels us to ask ourselves a hard question: Can we do the difficult work—the spiritual work—of learning from an imperfect past? This applies to our history as Biblical people, as Christians, as Mennonites, as citizens, as a congregation, and as individuals.

One of the most powerful images in Nehemiah is that of the people working side by side to rebuild the wall. Their names are meticulously recorded. We often skim over Biblical passages with long lists of names—we don't know these people anyway. But try to imagine what it was like to be there, to be building that wall in a state of hope and fear, physical and spiritual hunger. You would have known the people beside you—they were your family and friends, your servants, your masters, your priests, your underlings. Some of them you resented. Others inspired you. But you built the wall together.

In 1 Peter 2:1-5, we are given another image of wall building. This is the wall built from Christ, the cornerstone, and the other living stones, the people of God. Our faith is built upon, and with, the faith of others.

We forget this. As 21st century people, our world enables this forgetfulness. “Move forward,” the dominant voices say, “forget the past. History is quaint and amusing, but not relevant.” But how can we know which way is “forward” if we fail to contemplate where we have been? Otherwise we twist in the wind, never knowing the joy of true confession and repentance, worship, community, and meaningful work.

**Benediction:**

HWB 757, or repeat the call to worship.



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