

“Rumors and Lies”

Nehemiah 6:1-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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There's an old saying, "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is still putting its boots on." Have you ever had someone says something about you that's just not true? Or start a rumor about you? Maybe you were accused of something you didn't do or had a rumor spread about you. Or maybe, like Nehemiah, those lies were part of threats and intimidation. If you've ever experienced any of those things you know how stressful they can be.

A number of years ago I was working late when my business partner came to the office. He said, "We need to talk." He proceeded to accuse me of all sorts of things including mismanagement of the money. He added threats that his attorney was going to go through all the records and that he planned to sue me. Now I knew that I had the truth on my side. I knew that I had done nothing wrong. For one thing, his bookkeeper was the one who kept all the books. But even though I had the truth on my side, it was still a *very* tense couple of months not knowing what he might try to do.

In the sixth chapter of Nehemiah, his old enemies Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab are back causing more trouble. It's interesting that they keep showing up together because the three of them would not normally be friendly with one another. But they demonstrate that there's some truth to the idea that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The three of them had one thing in common – they wanted to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

They have been unsuccessful up to this point. And they're not happy about that. They feel threatened and maybe jealous. Now it's personal for them and so they target Nehemiah personally. Judah's enemies recognize that Nehemiah is a great leader and is the key to the entire rebuilding project. He must be stopped. One of the things we notice here is that Nehemiah is really all alone. Unlike the previous chapters, here Nehemiah doesn't mention anyone supporting him. Often leadership is like

that. When things get tough supporters tend to disappear but enemies never do.

In order to get rid of Nehemiah they try three different tactics. Dirty tricks, really. The first is to invite Nehemiah to come to a summit, to some peace talks. Sanballat may have tried a little flattery here. He may have said, "Hey Nehemiah, it looks like you're almost done with this wall. I didn't like it at first but since we have to be neighbors why don't we get everyone together and work all this out?" That seems reasonable, doesn't it? What could be wrong with a peace conference? But Nehemiah says no. Is he just being paranoid? I don't think so.

The whole thing smells fishy from the start. They want him to meet out of town. Two days travel out of town. In the middle of nowhere, just over the border outside of Judah. Nehemiah had two problems with this offer. First, they were really close to finishing the wall and he didn't really want to be gone a week. But he also probably figured out that they were planning to kill him. They would have sent a letter to Jerusalem saying something like, "we regret to inform you that there's been a terrible accident and Nehemiah didn't survive."

What's important for us today is to see how Nehemiah responded. He knew what they were trying to do. He says so in verse 2. But he didn't let them know that he knew. He very diplomatically says, "I'm really busy with this huge project and I won't be able to attend." If he had taken the time to argue with them it would have distracted him from his work as surely as going to Ono would have. As followers of Jesus there may be times when we must confront people who are opposing God's work. But there are also times when we need to have the wisdom and discernment to avoid the distraction and keep our focus on what God's calling us to do, which is to make disciples of Jesus. Nehemiah didn't let anything come between him and the "great work" he was doing and neither should we.

Since this tactic didn't work, Sanballat tried another one. This one was a thinly veiled threat.

He sends Nehemiah an “open letter,” which means everyone along the way has read it. He’s creating fake news. What he’s offering to Nehemiah at this point is basically a protection racket. He’s trying to blackmail Nehemiah. His letter says, “It is reported among the nations...that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king.” He presents his false accusations as “some people are saying...” This would be similar to a reporter asking, “Congressman, many people want to know if you’re still cheating on your wife.” Sanballat is saying, “there’s this rumor floating around and it would be a shame for you if the emperor heard it. So NOW how about we have our little meeting.”

The only way to respond to false accusations is with the truth and that’s what Nehemiah does. He writes back saying, “it’s not true. You’re just making that up and you know it.” Certainly Nehemiah was stressed about this threat. What if the emperor *does* hear about this? What if his friendship with the emperor is damaged because of these lies? The thing that gets him through this is his relationship with God. Nehemiah leans on God and on the truth, and that leads him to prayer, as it usually does.

The third attack is even more sinister. This time they pay off one of the prophets to try to get Nehemiah to sin. Nehemiah goes to meet with Shemaiah who says, “They’re coming to kill you while you sleep. You have to hide. Quick, I can hide you in the Temple. We can shut the doors and they’ll never think to look there.”

There are two temptations here. First, Nehemiah is tempted to run and hide, which may cause the work to stop. It’s not very motivating if the leader goes into hiding. The second problem is that what Shemaiah actually suggests is that they go into the Holy Place in the Temple. Only priests were permitted there and Nehemiah is not a priest. The penalty for him going into that part of the Temple is death.

Again, Nehemiah recognizes that this is a false prophesy. He has a high regard for God’s Word and he is not willing to violate it just to try to save his life. He says, “For this purpose he

was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me.”

It seems to me that there are a couple of key lessons for us here. First, Nehemiah had what we would call a biblical worldview. He interpreted everything in life in relation to the Scriptures. Today many Christians don’t even have a biblical worldview. Your worldview is the way you understand God, the world, and your relationship with both of them. Sadly, today many people who profess to be Christians try to interpret the Bible in light of their feelings and experiences with the world, rather than interpreting their world through the Word of God. A good way to test yourself is this. If you come across a passage of Scripture that you disagree with, are you more likely to try to change your belief or to change what the Bible says?

The second thing we can learn from this passage is that we need to stay focused on God’s Word and God’s work. There is so much that can distract us from the important work of making disciples. Even church activities can distract us from the mission God has given us. Like Nehemiah, each of us must keep coming back to what God wants us to do to accomplish his mission in that moment.

And finally, we should expect opposition, maybe even from people who are close to us. Sometimes that opposition will come in the form of threats or rumors. That’s why it’s so important to always stand for the truth. May it be so.

Amen.