

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Christmas, January 4, 2009, Liturgical Year "B"

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Nehemiah 2:1-20

*"Let Us Arise and Build"*

**WITHOUT A VISION THE PEOPLE PERISH**

We enter a new year, and with it comes New Year's resolutions. We've heard them before. Like, "I am going to lose so many pounds," "I am going to quit smoking or not drink as much," "I am going to spend more time with my family," or "I am going to do this or that better," and on and on. Well that's fine, but what we need is more than New Year's resolutions. What we need is a vision. The Bible says in **Proverbs 29:18**, "*Without a vision, the people perish.*"

Yes, we need a vision, we need God's vision. We need to be asking what is God's vision, what is His plan for our lives? The truth is God has a plan for each and every one of us. God has something that He wants you to do.

This plan includes every life we come in contact with - our families, in our neighborhood, in our church. In fact everyone we come in contact with is part of the plan. And if we are going to do our part in His plan we need to be also asking God, "What does He want us to do?" And until we start asking that question, we aren't going to know. And until we know the answer, we really aren't going to go anywhere. We will be like a ship adrift at sea.

The problem is too many people are simply drawing their breath and drawing their salary. They don't have a plan or a goal. They get up in the morning, gulp down a cup of coffee, read the paper, fight the traffic to work, go to work all day, come home, take an aspirin, eat their dinner, watch the TV and go to bed. The next day, it starts all over again. That's their life. God wants better for us. In fact, He has something far greater but it involves making His goals our goals.

**GOD-GIVEN GOALS**

You see we need to have goals in life but they need to be God-given goals. Only God-given goals will keep you from being a drifter. For without goals, you're like a ship without a rudder, a ship adrift at sea. And that's a ship that is doomed to failure. I mean, let's face it, most people don't plan to fail. They fail to plan. And if they do plan they do it without checking with the Captain of the ship - the Lord of hosts.

Now what I would like to do as we begin a new year is answer the question, what are the God-given goals for our church? What should be the vision for this body of Christ? We are not here by accident. We have seen the Lord's hand in getting us to this place. And it took more than just a year, it took several years. So we need to ask, "Now that we are here, now what?"

**THE EXAMPLE OF NEHEMIAH**

The answer can be found in Nehemiah chapter 2. As you turn there, a little background: Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes in the heart of Persia (modern-day Iran). Nehemiah, a Jew, had heard the reports about how Jerusalem had fallen into disrepair. His heart longed to return to his homeland but not just his homeland, it was the place that God had set apart to be the focal

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point for the nations of the world; the place where the Temple had been built; the place where God’s people had worshipped. That place had fallen into disrepair and disrepute. What was Nehemiah to do? Well let’s find out. Beginning at verse one...

**<sup>1</sup> And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I (*Nehemiah*) took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. <sup>2</sup> So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. <sup>3</sup> I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" <sup>4</sup> Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.**

Notice before Nehemiah said anything to the King, he prayed. How do you tune into a God-given goal? Pray. Ask the Lord. Jesus said, ***“You have not because you ask not.”*** If you are not in the habit of sharing what is on your heart with the Lord, if you are not keeping a line of communication open with His Holy Spirit, you will be adrift. Nehemiah prayed. And that’s why we have so many praying for our church, and specifically the prayer ministries of the Daughters of the King, Intercessory prayer chain, the Men’s and Women’s fellowship. We must make it a habit to pray.

Let’s continue. **<sup>5</sup> I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." <sup>6</sup> Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. <sup>7</sup> And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, <sup>8</sup> and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.”**

Nehemiah had a goal – and it was specific. It was not only to go back to his homeland, to the holy city, but that he might rebuild it. And he gave the king the details. God-given goals are specific. Have you asked the Lord to direct you in making goals concerning the following areas of your life: spiritual, physical, relational, intellectual, and financial?

There is something else that is obvious about Nehemiah’s goal. It wasn’t a fleeting desire, it was his passion. A God-given goal should get us spiritually excited and should motivate us to see that goal fulfilled, to see it to completion? Nehemiah was already looking at how to complete the goal.

We have seen this spiritual excitement the last few months haven’t we? To see the hand of God at work. To see the potential.

What else is true about Nehemiah and his plan? God’s hand was upon him. As a result, Nehemiah, knew God would make a way.

But notice what happens next? Nehemiah faces resistance. There will always be the naysayers and the doubters. Verses 10 introduce us to some. **<sup>9</sup> Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. <sup>10</sup> “When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it**

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*was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.”* And we hear more of their criticisms in verse 19. These were the governors and/or leaders of peoples who felt threatened by a revived Jewish state (sound familiar?). Yes, God will open the doors when we step out in faith, but there will be resistance. The truth is that it is never easy to accomplish a God-given goal. For while God may make a way, it will still take work and it will still take effort.

But not only did Nehemiah face resistance, when he arrived I am sure things looked far worse than he had anticipated or imagined. They always do when you see them in person. Recall Ground Zero after 9/11 or those who go to countries with great poverty.

*<sup>11</sup> So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. <sup>12</sup> And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. <sup>13</sup> So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. <sup>14</sup> Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. <sup>15</sup> So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. <sup>16</sup> The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work. <sup>17</sup> Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." <sup>18</sup> I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work. <sup>19</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" <sup>20</sup> So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."*

Something else that is true about a God-given goal. It demands our very best. Nehemiah had to travel, he had to prepare himself for a long journey. He couldn't go about this half-heartedly. When we go about a task for the Lord, we must go about it with our whole heart.

Last, we see that a God-given goal will always involve other people. What did Nehemiah do with the others? He talked about how God had led him and he shared his vision with them. You see God is more concerned with people than he is with anything else. He knows that what He gives us to do means working with others.

And what did the leaders and people say in reply? They said, *“Let us arise and build.”* And then we read, *“So they put their hands to the good work.”* Isn't that great? God-given goals always result in good work.

### **LET US ARISE AND BUILD!**

My friends, this is the vision I believe God is giving us for this time, for this place, for this church. *“Let us arise and build.”* And we will do it together.

So what needs to be done? There are three main areas of focus for the building of our church.

**First, there is the building structure.** There is still much in the way of repairs and remodeling that needs to be done to our actual church building. Let me name a few things that need to be addressed

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in the coming months and year. The south wall has major leaks – so it needs to be repaired. The garage behind the building needs to be replaced and some of the flashing and areas on the roof need to be fixed. The parking lot needs to be resurfaced. We need a new sign. We will be putting up a large fiber glass cross on the exterior wall facing Eggert Rd, and sandblasting a cross on the Star of David at the main entrance. We still need volunteers to help with additional cleaning, painting, light construction and other maintenance issues. Obviously, such endeavors will mean costs exceeding our normal budget expenses. So we will need to continue to be generous in our financial giving.

**Second, we need to build a Bible-believing Anglican witness in Western New York.** The fact of the matter is the Episcopal Church has developed a certain reputation and it is not one of growth and it is not reflective of true Biblical Anglicanism. In the Diocese of Western New York alone, the Diocese has lost over 22 percent of its attendance in the last ten years. Where did all these people go? They are either attending other churches or they are not attending at all. I believe it is our duty to reach them. To let them know that they have a home in Western New York. Furthermore, we will continue to work with our sister parishes St. Peter’s in Forestville, and St. Mary’s in Salamanca, as well as seek to reach out to former Episcopalians throughout Western New York.

**Third, we are called to reach out to the entire Western New York community.** We are to be a light not just to former Episcopalians but also for anyone else who is looking for a church home, but more importantly anyone who wants to know Christ as Lord and Savior and wants to grow in the knowledge and love of Him and His Holy Word.

The truth is while WNY has not has declined as drastically as the Episcopal Church, it has and continues to suffer loss of population. In fact, just yesterday I read online that the Buffalo, NY area was listed among the top ten most-dying cities in the USA. We along with places like Cleveland, Detroit, Youngstown, Canton, and Scranton - the “rust belt.” Now we can get down and say “*woes me*” but the fact is our community has much to offer. At the same time, the hope for our community is not more casinos, a bigger and better football stadium, more government services; the only hope is the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **OUR MISSION**

And since we know Who is the hope of the nations, our goal must be to make Him known. That is why the mission statement of St. Bartholomew’s is “*To proclaim the truth and love of Jesus Christ in word and in deed by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of God the Father.*”

And we do it with this building, with our Anglican witness and we do it by being the light of Jesus Christ. These I believe are our God-given goals. They are what we are to be about. They are our vision. And so on this first Sunday of the New Year, *let us arise and build.* In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!