Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My 3pm Monday class on Matthew and my 12:00 noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet this week, both [on my personal Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/scottengle).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* I’ve been told that my YouTube page/channel can be hard to find. A simple solution would be to [go to the link (here)](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChtwqaUcpZbwyTWnkp6INwQ?view_as=subscriber) and then bookmark the page or subscribe to my channel.

Last week, we talked about transformation. This week, we turn to hope . . . purposeful hope. For, as Craig Groeschel once put it, “Everyone ends up somewhere, but few people end up somewhere on purpose.”

**Proverbs 29:18 (The NET Bible)**

**When there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but the one who keeps the law, blessed is he!**

**Nehemiah 2:11-18 (NRSV)**

**So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.**

**Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good.**

You probably remember a show on cable television about bad jobs. Week after week the host took on one nasty task after another. There was even a British version of the show that looked at the worst jobs in history. Nehemiah has one of those jobs. He is the Persian king’s cupbearer. Yes . . . Nehemiah’s job is to taste the drink before giving it to the king in order to make sure the king isn’t poisoned. On the one hand, Nehemiah is clearly expendable. It makes one wonder how quickly King Artaxerxes ran through cupbearers. But on the other hand, Nehemiah must have been highly trusted by the king. In today’s story, Nehemiah relies on the king’s trust to move forward with God’s plans for Jerusalem.

Nehemiah has learned that Jerusalem is still in a terrible state, even decades after exiles began returning to the city. Though cupbearers are to come before the king with a smile on their face at all times, Nehemiah is unable to hide his sadness. When the king asks him what is wrong, Nehemiah describes his deep concern for “the city of his fathers” and asks permission to go to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding. Nehemiah had prayed to God about this and his prayers were answered. Artaxerxes grants permission and even helps Nehemiah in his mission, providing safe passage and building materials.

*“Put into my heart”*

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn’t tell anyone about his mission. But he’s got one and he’s confident that God is behind it: “I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.”

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I’m sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? And the visions of the prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God, back to God’s way and the joy of a life lived before God.

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that, frankly, I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah’s commissioning in Isaiah 6. I’ve never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah’s heart.

*A personal vision*

Nehemiah’s story reminds us that God speaks to different people in different ways. Some of us might have a “spectacular” experience of our own. For others, like me, God’s speaking is quieter, forcing me to shut up long enough to hear. Most often, God speaks to me through the pages of Scripture. It is in these stories and letters, such as today’s, that God punches through my busyness and distraction.

The writer of today’s proverb gets this. Even when there is no “prophetic vision,” we still have God’s Word. There are many Christians who believe that God doesn’t speak to anyone anymore the way that God spoke to Isaiah, that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is simply no need for it. We have Scripture and a Spirit-filled community in which to read and interpret it.

This is why it is so important that we not come to the Bible seeking merely a set of principles about how we ought to live or even a systematic presentation of our beliefs.

Rather, we step into Scripture so that we can hear God’s voice for ourselves, so we can come to understand who we really are and what God has in mind for us.

Ask yourself this: do you have a big vision for your own life? Do you have a strong sense of purpose and direction that shapes all aspects of your life? Do you have focus or do you wander aimlessly from day to day, month to month, especially now during the pandemic?

Just as God provided focus and direction for Nehemiah, God provides it for us as well. But it doesn’t happen by magic. There’s no fortune cookie to crack and no crystal ball we’ll gaze into. Nehemiah prayed and we are to pray. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and became part of the community there. We are to become part of the God’s community as well, here at St. Andrew. Worshipping together, albeit on-line for now, getting involved, learning alongside other Christians – this is how we come to hear God’s voice.

In the coming days, we will talk about this vision for our lives, for our relationship with God and one another, for all the aspects of our lives. We don’t all have the same purpose. God didn’t send all the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But we do all have purpose grounded in Christian hope. And we’ll find it together.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott