

He was complaining about being caught in a second traffic jam this month on I-5. I smiled and made a passing reference to traffic in Los Angeles or Manila. I even mentioned leaving a taxi in the middle of the street and walking to our destination in Manila. Why watch the meter run when you are going nowhere? His response was, “Yeah, but I live here.” He reminded me that if here is where one has lived their whole life than this is all the traffic that they know. So, it is with life – we are bound by our own experiences. The roadblocks and wolves we have encountered may not be the same as those others have but we have all run into roadblocks and confronted wolves.

Roadblocks and wolves are a part of life. Now, humor me for a moment—as I was working on this my mind wandered in a cartoonish fashion. I tried to picture a shepherd having a seminar of the dangers of wolves, etc. He had gathered his sheep, his flock, around him and was instructing them on the dangers of predatory animals. Maybe he had a few flash cards with pictures of wolves, lions or bears. Today, he might even have a PowerPoint presentation! He describes their hunting patterns. How they try to lure you away from the flock/herd. How they seek those who straggle behind or who wander away from the rest of the group as their prey. These are the easiest prey. It is best to stay together. There is safety in keeping together.

Now the sheep are not that interested. Some are munching on the nice fresh grass. “The shepherd certainly picked a nice resort area to hold the seminar, nice fresh grass.” Other are “Baaing” their boredom. None seem to be listening or paying much attention to the shepherd. They have heard it all before and so far the shepherd has kept them safe. Why worry? Won’t the shepherd always be around to protect us?

I recall the story of a new pastor in a congregation who preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row. Two Sundays were okay but when it happened on the third one some got a little concerned and decided to confront the pastor. The response: “Why change sermons until you put this one into practice?”

Jesus is getting his followers ready to confront the world. They are going out into the wilderness with his message. He is warning them that the world will not embrace the message they have so heartily embraced. He is telling them and us that they will be misunderstood and his words misrepresented. Why? His words will threaten their way of life. Things will not be the way they have always been. Though his message is one of forgiveness and inclusion, hope and reconciliation, it will not be welcomed. Change is difficult at best and when the change seems to threaten the current power structure or understanding of faith – opposition will come. The world perceives faith in one way and when that way is challenged – roadblocks and wolves. However, Jesus has warned them (us), these things should no longer come to them as a surprise. When they are confronted, imprisoned, etc. Jesus says, “Remember me.” See how I was treated and find hope – the road is not easy.

I am not sure if Nehemiah expected the opposition to be so great and so intense. He has done all the right things. He had fasted and prayed, received permission from the king to be there to rebuild the city wall and had even secured from the king's forest the materials necessary. Who would be against rebuilding a city wall to protect its people from enemies – wolves? Who would be against such a worthy project? However, there was opposition. They were afraid of what it might mean if Jerusalem again were a protected city. They were afraid that it might again become a world power. They were afraid that it might mean a threat to their way of life. After all they have become accustomed to the power they now have. And, these people are different. They have a different diet. They worship a different God. They could be a threat to our way of life. (Have you ever heard those words? Worse, have you even spoken those words?)

And, there are wolves right in their midst. People are taking advantage of their own people. When they have gotten into financial trouble and needed help they have helped them but have charged them interest. This is against the Law (Ex. 22:25). They are not living up to the faith that they profess to follow. This has to stop. How can you expect the city wall to be rebuilt when there is such animosity among the very people of God against one another? How can you expect them to work side by side in rebuilding a city and wall when there are wolves working beside them?

Nehemiah is facing difficult days. There are roadblocks and wolves all over the place. Everywhere he turns there are roadblocks. It would be easy for him to just return to the king and his duties. Why bother with such a mess? The walls need to be repaired and there is so much “other” rubbish to deal with. Nehemiah, though, keeps focused on the goal before him, the rebuilding of the wall. He deals with each situation head-on. He will not be deterred from the wall and its completion. And, in 52 days the wall is rebuilt. Imagine this – there are no power tools to help with the job. No hydraulic lifts to place the stones in their proper position. No trucks/tractors to haul the timber from the king's forest to the city. All the labor is done with manpower! But in 52 days the walls are rebuilt—Listen to Nehemiah's report: *“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.”* The surrounding nations, their enemies, recognized the magnitude of the job completed and how impossible it was to do it in 52 days.

Our God is greater than the roadblocks placed in our way and the wolves who prey in our midst. Jesus says that his Spirit will be guiding us, speaking through us. I John 4:4 says, *“Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.”* The world will try to divert us from the task of rebuilding the broken relationships between us and God. The world will misunderstand our mission and our message. Attacks will come from both without and within – we need to be aware of that. There will be those who will try to hold to their positions of power and prestige when the world/God demands change. Minds will be closed to new things. Eyes

will fail to see God working in a new way in the world. Jesus warns us and asks us to be aware of such. *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.”*

The world (we) want to settle in and be comfortable but God is demanding that we be uncomfortable until *“God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done in all the earth.”* Ken Fong at our regional convention told of how God has challenged him to make his congregation “uncomfortable.” How God is challenging him to challenge his people to new levels of faith and witness. Most of us don’t like to be uncomfortable but that is where God is – in the uncomfortable places of the world—bringing hope, peace and reconciliation—this is where the Church must be, if we are to ever change the world.

Jesus warns the journey will not be an easy one—this journey of faith. However we have the power to conquer the roadblocks and wolves in our way. Our God is able! It was 52 days from when they began the work on the wall that it was completed. It should have taken much longer but Nehemiah would not, nor would he let his people, be distracted from the work they were doing. They battled roadblocks and wolves and stunned the world by completing the work in 52 days. Nehemiah kept the vision before them. Was it easy? No! But it was completed.

Jesus promises to go before us and be with us. He alerts us to the possible dangers and roadblocks but promises that nothing put before us is impossible for us to conquer as long as we keep sight of the vision, the goal before – that the world may know the love and forgiveness of our God. May it also be said of us as of the church in Thessalonica, *“These are they who have turned the world upside-down” (Acts 17:6)* – regardless of the wolves and roadblocks in our path.