

“Sending Messages”; Series – Nehemiah
Nehemiah 6 (Scripture in Red)
Westside Fellowship CRC; 28 October 2018
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—² Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages^[a] on the plain of Ono.”

Now, I know that in your day, you can send messages across the entire globe in split seconds. For us, it was not like that. Messages were sent by people who traveled to give messages. But, just to translate this into your typical pattern of sending and receiving messages, I will accommodate...



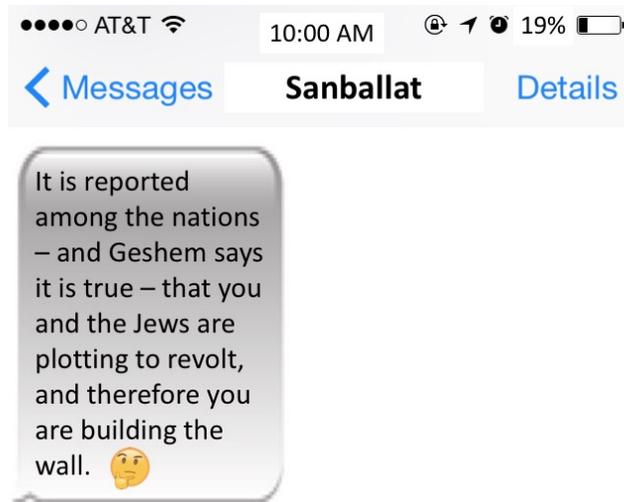
⁴ Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

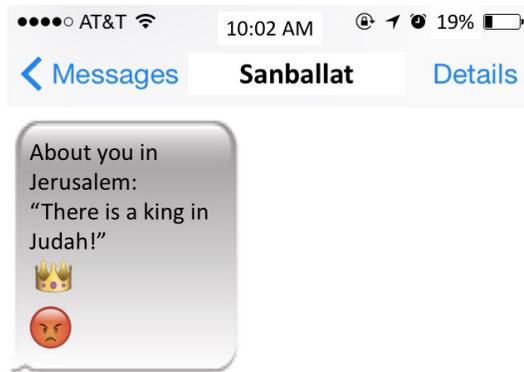
You are going to have times in your life when there are those who try to distract you from the work that you’re doing... And you are going to need to discern if it is worth it to be distracted... But whether or not you discern that you should take a pause in the work that you are doing, it is so important that you do not get riled up. Say what is so for you in a way that responds without being reactive. This, in the long run, is going to be better for everybody.

⁵ Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter

An unsealed letter...You don’t have seals in your day, so let me explain... A seal on a letter does two things. When you receive a sealed letter, you recognize the seal as belonging to the person

who sent it... so you know it is most certainly from that person... but additionally, the seal – particularly an unbroken seal – assures you that you are the only person who has seen the letter. This is kind of like a private message on Facebook... When it comes to you privately, it's sealed... but I received an UNSEALED letter, which tells me that this was more like posting something publicly on Facebook... You might have a particular person that you're writing to, but when the message is public, everybody can see it... This unsealed letter may have been seen by any number of people on its way to me. And this tells me that Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem – they WANTED others to see what they had written here... They were spreading rumours. Here's what it said:





I could have defended myself particularly against each charge. I was not plotting to revolt. I had not appointed prophets to claim my kingship. But here was another chance for me to carefully reply. I simply said.

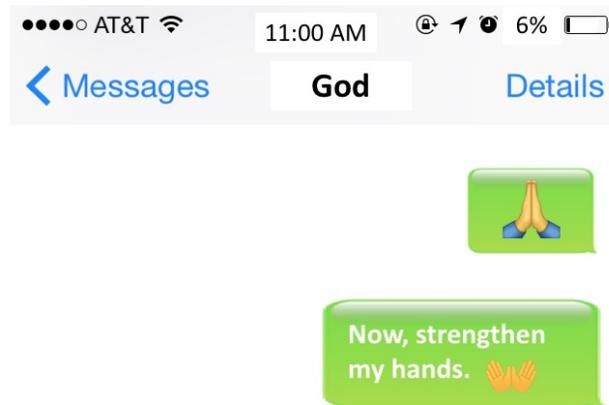


In other words – FAKE NEWS.

⁹They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

Isn't it interesting... when we let ourselves get frightened... when we give in to our fears and anxieties, we get too weak for the work. We are debilitated. Has that happened to you? Someone says something about you that you know is not true... and you know that they have been talking to others about this... and you know this is a tactic... and either consciously, or perhaps even subconsciously, they are trying to get you to be afraid – so afraid that you stop the forward progress you are making...

You know what I did, when this happened to me? I prayed... And I invite you to do this, too... Instead of lashing out against your enemy or your opponent... or whoever it is getting in the way of the work God is calling you to do... or instead of giving in to your fears and giving up on the work... pray to God.



And as you will see, God did. Now here's another part of the story...

¹⁰ One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”

Here I am at Shemaiah's house... He is someone I trust... He's someone who is shut-in and so I visit him in his home... This man, Shemaiah, shares a name with Shemaiah, the man of God, the prophet, who served during the time of King Rehoboam. But this man, Shemaiah, also shares a name with the false prophet who opposed the true prophet of God, Jeremiah. And so I have to discern... did this man really speak a word from the Lord? Were they coming to kill me? And if so, should I go to the temple and lock myself in? I determined that No, I should not listen to this man...

¹¹ I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”

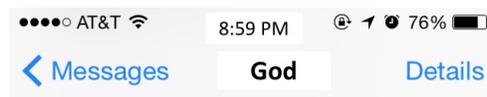
¹² I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

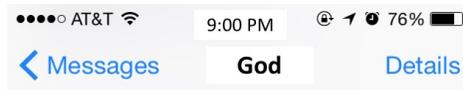
You see, we need to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. For many false prophets go out in to the world... (1 John 4:1) Shemaiah was a false prophet.

And then... what did I do? Did I now finally go on the attack against Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem? Did I go on the attack against Shemaiah?

No – once again, I went to God. Paul in Romans 12:19 said – long after my lifetime... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. And so I prayed.



Remember, Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah...



And how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.



I left them in the Lord’s hands.

Though this lesson I have for you is mainly about my interactions with these men, you might be interested to know that in the midst of all this...

¹⁵ the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

Did they succeed in intimidating me? No. Did they succeed in frightening me to the point of dissuading me from my task? No. Instead... my hands were strengthened, just like I had prayed, and the work was completed.

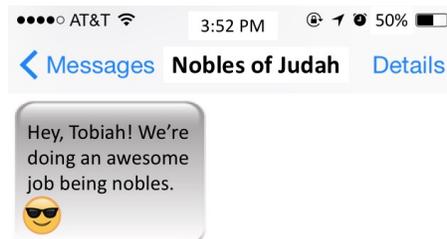
¹⁶ When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

Isn't it fascinating that first of all, the very things Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were accusing me of doing, they were doing themselves. They were accusing me of plotting rebellion – but they were plotting to harm me. Sanballat accused me of hiring prophets, when that's exactly what he was doing. They accused me of lying, and that's what they were doing...

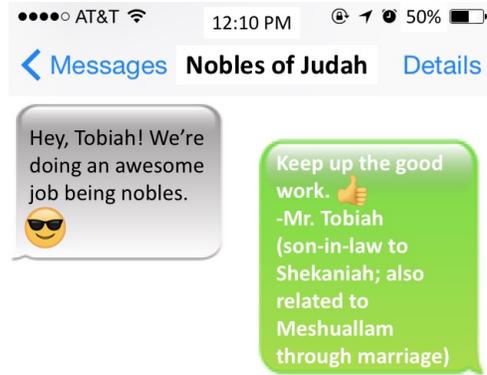
And isn't it fascinating that they were trying to frighten me and make me lose my confidence in myself and in God... But because of the work of God and the way he enabled me to stay the course, the fear they were trying to dish out came right back to them... They were trying to dismantle my self-confidence, and they ended up without self-confidence.

And you can see that fear and that lack of confidence just perpetuating ... it didn't gain traction, but they kept at it. When you don't have self-confidence and when you are afraid... you end up doing a lot of useless communication. Some of my Jewish brothers and sisters got caught up in this...

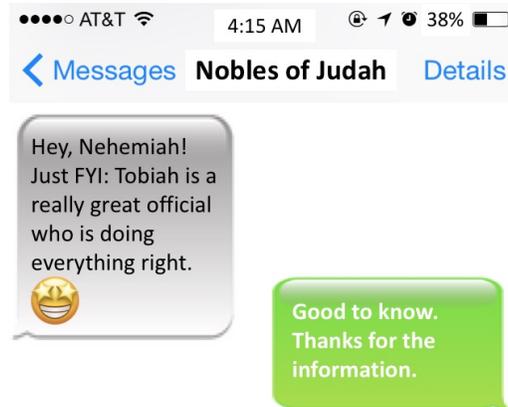
¹⁷ (Also, in those days) the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah,



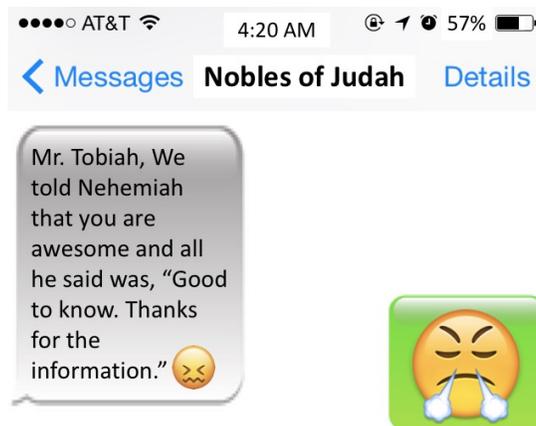
and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them. ¹⁸ For many in Judah were under oath to him, since he was son-in-law to Shekariah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berekiah.



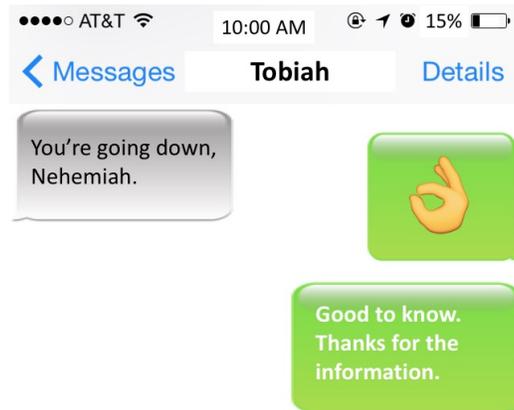
19 Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds



and then telling him what I said.



And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.



What do I most want you to know from these encounters? What is most important for you to know. I suppose it's this. You are secure in God. No matter what. Maybe you're not building a wall like I was. Maybe you're not leading a group of people like I was. Maybe you don't have a whole group of really powerful men breathing down your neck like I did... but you are doing hard things. And you have tough relational and kingdom work that you're doing. And the spiritual forces of evil in this dark world would like nothing more than to destroy you. But you are secure in God.

*God is your refuge and your strength – an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore you do not fear – though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. (Psalm 46)*

Long after I died and was buried—about 400 years after—God – the God who strengthened my hands for the task of building the wall – and strengthened my spirit for the task of interacting with S and T – God did the strongest thing. And it was the last thing I could ever have expected. He sent a an unsealed message! Not through an aid or a prophet... Not by text. He sent his message in the flesh. He became one of us. He became human. He was accused of all sorts of things... of being a false prophet, a demon even... He was given a bad name and discredited. He was tempted by the devil... and he was despised and rejected – talked about behind his back. And in the end, he was killed.

But that was not the end... Death could not hold him.

And death cannot hold you either... The death that you will die at the end of your life, that can't hold you... You, like me, will be gathered into the arms of Jesus and will wait along with me for the resurrection of the dead. You will also be raised to life.

And the little deaths that come your way every day – in the form of taunts and lies and cruel hate and a flood of mortal ills – those deaths can't hold you either.

Because in your baptism, you were identified with Christ. You died and your life is now hidden in Christ with God. Through Jesus, you are secure in God.

Someone wrote about this in a song that y'all sing every year around this time... And I think I'd like to sing it with you... (A Mighty Fortress is Our God)