

We're in a series called *Divine Discontent*. We are considering the idea that, while discontent is usually thought of negatively, there are times when God, whose own discontent over a world subject to sin and death caused him to move for the purpose of redemption, also moves in us to create a dissatisfaction with the way things are and calls us to engage it. We're studying the Old Testament book of Nehemiah to see how we should respond when God stirs our hearts.

This weekend we pause as a nation to remember and celebrate the great civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. He was a man whose life is defined by his words and actions taken to confront the injustice he observed, injustice he experienced, and injustice he knew just wasn't the way it was supposed to be. He was a man of faith who was discontent with current reality and who moved to engage it.

This week I read an article about King's famous "I have a dream" speech given on August 29, 1963 in Washington, DC. Apparently, the night before, King asked his aides about the speech he was to give the next day, and the counsel was candid. One associate said, "Don't use the lines about "I have a dream". It's trite, its cliché. You've used it too many times already." The conversation continued, many varied and passionate opinions were given, and King, who hoped his words would be received "like the Gettysburg Address", ended the conversation by saying "I am now going upstairs to my room to counsel with my Lord. I will see you all tomorrow."

What would he say when his moment came? Was it up to him to figure it out? What was at stake? What was the risk? King could have relied on his own skill and instinct and come up with something meaningful. He is the envy of all of us who speak for a living. He could have also been fearful of responses and froze. But his approach was to seek the counsel of his Lord to prepare for his moment. **Bold dependence is the catalyst to bold action.**

You and I live in that same tension when God stirs our hearts. It's a tension that exists between waiting and action, preparing and proceeding, praying and performing. It's a tension that asks, "what's my responsibility?" and "what is God's?"

Last week we looked at chapter 1 when Nehemiah was confronted with divine discontent. He received a report from his brother that Jerusalem was in shambles and the people were under duress. This crushed him because it's not the way it's supposed to be. Jerusalem was to be the center of God's people and the place of worship. How would he respond? Would he storm the gates? Demand the king do something about it? Escape to go help? Freeze with fear? Shrug his shoulders and say there was nothing he could do about it? This morning we're going to see Nehemiah's response when he is given an opportunity to move. But for us to learn from what happens in chapter 2, we need to understand and appreciate what happens before then.

There is a gap of time between chapters 1 and 2. 1:1 tells us Nehemiah received the report about Jerusalem in the month of Chislev, and chapter 2 opens in the month of Nisan. Chislev is November/December, and Nisan is March/April. That means there's a four-month gap between chapters 1 and 2. And while Chapter 1 gives us a lengthy and emotional prayer in the moment, I believe it is an indication of what Nehemiah did from the moment divine discontent entered his heart to the time of chapter 2. You can go back to 1:5, but just look at 1:11.

[Nehemiah 1:11] ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.

For four months, Nehemiah spent his time pleading with God, hearing from God, and fasting and praying. It was a time to learn God’s heart, learn patience and perseverance, and be prepared for what God was calling him to do. It was also a time of asking God to work in the heart of Artaxerxes. This is a picture of bold dependence, not passive waiting. It was a time to let God deal with over eagerness that may cause him to lurch while still unprepared, or fears that might keep him from moving at all. This was a time of pursuing the Lord to declare his need for him and a time to let God refine him both spiritually and practically.

Hudson Taylor, the well-known missionary to China, said “**God uses men who are weak and feeble enough to lean on him.**” MLK was a gifted orator, full of passion and divine discontent, but he knew he needed to counsel with his Lord, to depend on the grace of God, if he was going to accomplish what he hoped to accomplish in his speech. He took the necessary time to spend with the Lord and receive what he needed from him.

How do you normally respond when stirred? My default is to go, and then figure it out along the way. Sometimes that gets things moving. Other times that leaves me unprepared when I encounter the first speedbump. If your tendency is to rush in because it has to happen now and it’s all up to you, or to shrink back, because there’s no way you could make a difference, there’s something we must remember. While God can accomplish it without you, you can’t accomplish it without God. However, God wants to use you, and that means you have a part to play, an impact to make. That first requires your dependence. Bold dependence says “God, you have given this burden to me, and it’s only thru you that I can do anything about it.” And when we take a posture of bold dependence, it can become a catalyst for bold results.

Bold dependence empowers us to take bold action. If God gives us divine discontent, at some point he will call us to move. Our dependence in him empowers us to move with clarity, conviction, and courage when he says “go”.

[Nehemiah 2:1-3] In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. ² And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. ³ I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

It is no accident that the one God stirs to go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem had such significant access to the Persian king. God’s providence creates opportunity. Nehemiah was Artaxerxes’ cupbearer, a role that likely had him sample the king’s wine to ensure it wasn’t poisoned, but also a role that likely included an intimate relationship with the king as a confidant. We are not sure why Nehemiah chooses this day to act. Perhaps he got clear leading from God, or perhaps his heart simply could not keep his pain in hiding any longer (or maybe he was good at being passive-aggressive and manipulated the king into asking what was wrong!)

Nehemiah gets real. He allows himself to be sad, allows his heart to show. This goes beyond being vulnerable emotionally. This is a bold risk. Ancient kings thought their presence was enough to brighten anyone's day. A sad face in their presence called into question their charisma. Additionally, if you go back into Ezra, the book before Nehemiah (though the Jewish scriptures actually consider them one book), Artaxerxes had ordered all work in Jerusalem to stop. So not only is Nehemiah sad in his presence, he's clearly unhappy with the king's edict. He is playing with fire, **but he moves boldly because he has the conviction and courage of one who has depended boldly.** He engages respectfully, honestly, passionately, and even with savvy. His reference to the burial place of his ancestors would have appealed to the values of a Persian king whose culture gave great respect to such things.

There is risk of rejection and loss when we move boldly for God. When we share our heart, share our divine discontent, there's no guarantee anyone will listen to or care about what you have to say. But if we refuse to share our hearts, no one will listen either. Bold dependence leads to bold action, regardless of potential consequences.

The phrase "I have a dream" actually never made it into the script of the speech MLK was to deliver that day. But as the story goes, as he was finishing his scripted remarks, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson kept crying out "Tell them about the dream, Martin." Ultimately, he laid his papers aside and, at the risk of using a tired phrase that would ultimately be rejected, but with the courage of one who has depended boldly, he delivered the remarks that will forever be imprinted in the history of our nation.

Bold dependence encourages us to maintain...bold dependence. That's not a typo. It's a great reminder that, if we start with the foundation of dependence on God, it will create a reflex in us to remain in that posture while moving boldly.

[Nehemiah 2:4] ⁴Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Artaxerxes asks what Nehemiah wants. This is, what we call in sales, a buying signal. But instead of blurting out all that he wants, there's a pause. Nehemiah has earned the opportunity to be heard, the opportunity to ask for what he wants, but there is no guarantee of success. So, in a moment, he prays another request for help. The God who got him this far is the same God who will close the deal. His dependence continues. His humility continues. There is no "I got this!" or "Thanks God. I'll take it from here." This is a man defined by prayer. His foundational way to engage his divine discontent is through communion with the God who stirred his heart in the first place.

I often have to remind myself of this. I'll be in the middle of my sermon preparation, staring at my notebook or computer screen or Bible, and thinking "I have no idea what to say from here." Then I remember. The God I prayed to in the beginning, the God I have depended on to give me all the words up to that point, is probably a good person to go back to in the middle when I find myself stuck. I am most effective when I start dependent and maintain that posture throughout.

These have often been called arrow prayers, prayers offered in the moment. God honors them, and God wants to receive them. They are not a substitute for regular communion with the Lord but are, instead, the instinctive response of a life grounded in prayer, and a life dependent on the Lord.

Bold dependence equips us to make bold plans. God is a giver of wisdom and helps us develop plans and dream bigger than we ever could on our own.

[Nehemiah 2:5-8a] ⁵ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.” ⁶ And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. ⁷ And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, ⁸ 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 of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked.”

Nehemiah’s practical preparation is evident. Not only did he spend those four months connecting with God on a spiritual level, but he put together the details of what he wanted to accomplish. Artaxerxes asks how long he’ll be gone, and Nehemiah has an answer for that, one apparently compelling enough that he gets the “yes”. But he’s not done. He asks for letters authenticating him as being sent by the king and asks the king for supplies to rebuild the city. Nehemiah planned his work and then he worked his plan, and the king granted him all he asked.

God’s grace and our effort are not contradictory. Prayer and planning are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I would dare say that **prayer is the beginning of planning**. Planning is not a lack of faith but the evidence of it. Planning, under the counsel of God, expresses dependence by acknowledging that God’s way is best and making a commitment to live by it. Throughout Scripture, God uses faithful people who make plans. Even Jesus himself, through submission to the Father, took on flesh and executed a detailed and specific plan of salvation.

MLK recognized the importance of the counsel of God for the sake of a plan. **“Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.”** We should all live by that same request. Navigating Next is all about planning, intentional design. While Repurposed is a six-week journey that helps you discover your God-given purpose, your divine discontent, Navigating Next is the follow-up to help you put a plan in place to live that out and navigate any speedbumps along the way.

When we depend boldly, move boldly, and plan boldly, God provides bold results.

[Nehemiah 2:9-10] ⁹ Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. ¹⁰ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah a military escort that reinforces the credentials he carries. The provision goes beyond his request. “Now to him who is able to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine...” Your dreams might be big, but God’s dreams for you and what he wants to accomplish through you are bigger.

The key here is the grace of God and the heart of Nehemiah. Nehemiah cared about the things God cares about. Nehemiah went to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. He went do what God called him to do, what God stirred him up to do, and God came through. When we align ourselves with what God wants for our lives, we will all be able to say what Nehemiah says at the end of v8.

[Nehemiah 2:8] And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.”

The good hand of God is available to all of us who would allow him to stir our hearts, lean into him completely dependent on his grace, and eagerly receive his counsel in how we should live it out. When we are boldly dependent on God, we allow him to work boldly through us.