

## Welcome

One of my favorite movies of all time is the LEGO Movie. The whole movie is a story about a LEGO guy who doesn't know where he fits in (which you would think would be easy for a LEGO). He wants to be creative, to think outside the box. But the prevailing wisdom of LEGOLand is that there's one right way to build. So Lord Business, the lord of LEGO works hard to keep our little LEGO guy in line.

It's a fun critique of what LEGO has turned into - rather than buying a giant bag of bricks and building whatever you can imagine, you buy a kit to build a pirate ship or the Millennium Falcon or whatever, and you follow a specific set of instructions and hopefully don't have any parts left over.

The movie is a smart, fun take on LEGO as a toy. But the really cool thing in the film is that we go to the 'Real World' and learn that our little LEGO main character is a real boy who loves LEGO, and Lord Business is actually his dad, who has built a huge LEGO city and doesn't let his son play with it.

The whole story becomes this multi-layered metaphor about parents and children, passing on our passions to the next generation and how legalism can get in the way of love.

Not bad for a toy movie.

At the heart of it all is this question that's sort of about LEGO and sort of about life: what story do you believe? Do you believe the one where there's one right way, and you have to follow the rules or you're lost? Or do you believe in love, creativity and beauty?

Technically, both are 'correct' ways to play with LEGO. And we know lots of people who follow both philosophies in life. The LEGO Movie has a clear position. But it leaves it up to us to choose: which story are we going to live out?

I love this idea of choosing the story we're going to live. Today, we're going to explore a couple of different stories about what Church is and what our role in it is. And like the LEGO Movie, we're going to have to choose one of these stories to live out. I hope we choose the one that points us toward the future, toward the church God is inviting us to be.

## Message

We're in a series called New Leaf. Now, I know you're thinking that this feels like more of a spring series but I live in Texas, which quit having real seasons a few years ago. And this is a series about change. Change happens to us all the time, at every level. We experience personal change in the form of new relationships, the end of long-term relationships. We experience it in changing jobs. Having kids, kids growing up. We experience change when we move and the world around us changes when we stay put.

And of course our church is changing. For almost 15 years, we've been a building-centric, locally focused congregation. But over the last few years, our circumstances have changed and we just voted on a new direction for our congregation. That's scary. I don't know very many people who love change, who seek it out. Most of us prefer predictability and stability, and one thing we know about change is that it's seldom predictable or stable.

So we're spending six weeks looking at some people in Scripture who had to face big changes - changes that felt as existential as the changes we're facing right now. We're going to explore the nature of the changes they faced, compare them to the changes facing us, and we're going to ask what we can learn about how to be faithful now from how they were faithful then.

We began by looking at the role of faith in change. We saw Abram's encounter with God and how he responded with faith in the face of uncertainty. Last week, we explored Joseph's story and saw what it looks like to have faith God is at work even when our Plan As fall through. Last week, we met Moses, who had a bevy of very good reasons he couldn't be trusted with the change God called him to lead.

Today, we're challenging another big misconception when it comes to change. When we think of big change, we often think it comes through a lone, dynamic leader. Martin Luther King was the Civil Rights movement. Steve Jobs invented the iPhone. Donald Trump is going to save or damn the country. We love people with big personalities, people who can captivate a room. Think about the stories we've explored in this series so far - Abram, Joseph, Moses. Moses!

But I hope we'll remember through our Scriptures today that God's people are just that - a *people*. We've never succeeded because of the work of a single person. God's work in the world has always been about a whole group - a nation, a church. That means there's no such thing as a passive member. There are no sidelines in the Church. If God has called you to be part of us, then you have a vital role to play among us.

Turn with us to [Nehemiah 1](#).

Nehemiah lived nearly a thousand years after Moses, after God's people had settled the Promised Land, after they'd established a monarchy. After they'd split into two kingdoms and after both of those kingdoms had been conquered by evil empires.

The Babylonian empire had conquered Judah. They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, torn down its walls and destroyed the Temple built by king Solomon. The Babylonians also forcibly deported the majority of their religious, political and social leaders.

Nehemiah is the descendant of some of those Exiles. It's been nearly a century since the fall of Jerusalem, and Nehemiah and the other grand- and great-grandchildren of those original exiles have made a home in Babylon. They haven't forgotten God or where they came from, and they all long to one day return to the home of their ancestors and rebuild.

Then a new empire rose - the Persians defeated the Babylonians. Nehemiah ends up in the court of King Artaxerxes. Cyrus gives Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the Temple.

This is a truly amazing moment - one that was a literal dream come true for God's people.

For Nehemiah, it wasn't a coincidence or happy accident. When he heard of the terrible state of Jerusalem, look what he did:

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. — [Nehemiah 1:4](#)

Then, when the king asked Nehemiah how he could help:

“With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied...” — [Nehemiah 2:4](#)

And then, when the king sent Nehemiah back with resources and support:

The king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me. — [Nehemiah 2:8](#)

And even when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and encountered skepticism and resistance, he said:

“The God of heaven will help us succeed.” — [Nehemiah 2:20](#)

I'm sure you're picking up on a theme just in these first two chapters. At every step along the way, Nehemiah prayed. He sought God's guidance and protection. He trusted the God who had protected and provided for Nehemiah's people thus far would continue to do so. Nehemiah's many bold actions were grounded in this confidence that God was for him, and God would protect him.

This is a confidence worth celebrating, a faith worth imitating. Can we sing together and ask God for this kind of faith?

## Song

Would it surprise you to learn that, even with Nehemiah's unshakable confidence in God's provision and protection, rebuilding Jerusalem was not all smooth sailing?

Turn with us to [Nehemiah 4](#).

Remember: Nehemiah's born and raised in Babylon, and lives in Persia. It's been 70 years since the fall of Jerusalem. The people left behind have rebuilt in their own way. The nations around them have become accustomed to a weak, ineffectual Judah.

And Nehemiah has come to disrupt this status quo. As he leads the efforts to rebuild, the nations around them send raiding parties to disrupt and mock the efforts. As you can imagine, the people Nehemiah's leading get discouraged. Watch what he does:

As I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, "Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!"

When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. — [Nehemiah 4:14-17](#)

I love the way Nehemiah organizes here - everyone remains prepared. Half work, half watch. But it's an all-hands-on-deck situation. This model is rich with possibilities, especially in the face of change.

The story of Moses liberating God's people from slavery under Egypt is the foundational story for a whole movement of theology called Liberation Theology. It originated in the 1950s both in the American South with Black US theologian James Cone and a Guatemalan Catholic Priest named Gustavo Gutierrez. Independently of each other, Cone and Gutierrez saw in the story of the Exodus a God we know because God moves to liberate the oppressed.

Cone looked for God's liberation in the context of the pre-Civil Rights Jim Crow America. Gutierrez saw the oppression of Central and South America by the European colonial powers. The way they articulated Liberation Theology resonated across the globe. Liberation Theology became a major force both in the American Civil Rights movement and in the independence movements across Africa and Latin America.

Oppressed peoples saw themselves as the enslaved Hebrews. Leaders of the freedom movements - like King, Nelson Mandela or Gutierrez - were cast as latter-day Moses figures., while the colonial powers were Egypt and the Pharaoh. It was a powerful rhetorical tool that

reminded the freedom fighters that God was for them, that God identified with them and saw their dignity even when their oppressors didn't.

By the 1990s, nearly every nation in Africa and Latin America had won its freedom and America had passed legislation to protect the Civil Rights of black citizens.

And the very theology that had been so instrumental in the cause of freedom - Liberation Theology - was now doing harm to these same peoples as they worked to rebuild after centuries of oppression.

It was Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambe who diagnosed the problem. In 1980, he wrote *An African Theology of Liberation*, which articulated Liberation theology for an African lens. A little over a decade later, though, Mugambe had rejected Liberation Theology in favor of what he called Reconstruction Theology.

The problem with Liberation Theology, according to Mugambe, is that it requires a stark binary - oppressor and oppressed. Slaver and enslaved. Pharaoh and Moses. That was very effective in the age of colonialism, when the lines between the two were stark - in Kenya, it was the British and the indigenous tribes.

But once the colonial powers left, the binary of Liberation Theology became not only ineffective but harmful. Because reconstruction is *messy*. The lines between good and evil aren't so clearly drawn. People who make great revolutionaries make really awful presidents and prime ministers. Mugambe pointed out how, again and again, these movements that persisted in the Liberation Theology binary didn't have the necessary tools to work together as a group of imperfect people. Because everyone had to be either a Pharaoh or a Moses.

That's why Mugambe insisted these nations would all be better off moving from Liberation Theology to Reconstruction Theology. From the Exodus story to the Return from Exile. From Moses to Nehemiah!

He said, "Now the Pharaohs are gone, so we need to rebuild our nations... together. All hands on deck. Watching each others' backs, protecting each other."

As we consider the change ahead of us, I want to ask you what story you're living in. Our culture has one story of church we've used for centuries - church is a building where we go on Sundays to sing and listen to a sermon. That model relies on a Moses, a pastor who has a special connection to God. We're even supposed to bring a revelation down from Sinai once a week. It's the pastor's job to bring people in and make sure they're growing spiritually and counsel them when they're hurting and fix things when they're angry.

But friends, that model doesn't work anymore (I'm not sure it ever actually worked). Our culture has shifted dramatically in the last generation, and we need a new story.

This new model we're building looks much more like Nehemiah's model. We've got detractors, others who are very happy with the model as it is, who will criticize us, mock us, try to get in our way. But if God has called you here, then God is calling you to be a part of this. This change won't happen if it's all up to me, or even me and our Leadership Team. This new model is something that requires all of us. Because Jesus' church was always designed to be an 'all hands on deck' movement. So I hope you're excited about what's next because it relies on *you!*

## Communion + Examen

We all receive Jesus' meal together.

How have I been sensing God inviting me deeper into the work ahead of us?

What is keeping me from saying Yes to God's call?

How can I say Yes to God's call this week?

## Assignment + Blessing

What does it look like for you to be all-in?