Text: Nehemiah 1 & 2
Date: July 19, 2015
Title: Everyday Superheroes > “Nehemiah: X-Ray Vision”
Theme: We become superheroes when we focus our efforts on an issue that grips our heart and is in our power to do something about.

Question of the Week

What’s a problem in the world that you’re passionate about trying to solve?

Intro

Last week, if you remember, we continued our “Superheroes” theme by talking about Batman’s butler, Alfred, and some unsung heroes of the everyday using the Old Testament story of Aaron and Hur from Exodus 17
One comment I got was that it was a ‘creative and odd’ concept
I guess I’ll take that
In any case, I hope some of you got to thank an Alfred, Aaron, or Hur last week
I also hope some of you got to be an Alfred, Aaron, or Hur to someone’s Moses last week
This week, it’s about vision – X-ray vision, of course

Prayer

Sermon

This is one of Superman’s most potent powers – his ability to see through anything
It’s also the one Superman gets himself into trouble with – in the movie Superman Returns (2006) he demonstrates this ability when he’s able to see what color underwear Lois Lane is wearing
She’s quite happy about this ability at other moments, though, when he’s able to rapidly scan her for injuries after any sort of mishap suffered in the course of saving the world from evil

Scientists will be quick to point out that X-ray vision from a scientific perspective is problematic – it’s just not feasible <slide>
That’s because X-rays pass through whatever it is they are aimed at – they don’t really ‘bounce back’ – so you need a plate on the back side to ‘capture’ the image.

Just like when you go to a dentist’s office – there’s the x-ray machine, then your teeth, then the film.

So the idea of using your eyeball to both shoot out X-rays and then receive them back again to sense the image doesn’t really work.

Then again, kryptonite isn’t real either, so who cares? (Be sure to tell your friends that today in church you learned why X-ray vision isn’t really possible. Then I’ll really have earned the ‘odd’ label.)

My point today is about vision - vision is important
Knowing where you want to go in life
Who you want to be
What steps you’re going to take to get there

It’s important for churches, and for individuals too

I was blessed to celebrate a wedding yesterday – it was the wedding of Emily Pagnotta & Bo Petrillo – great couple.

One of the questions I ask every couple is where they see themselves in 10 years, 20 years
I want to know if they have a vision
And if their two visions are consistent with each other

Vision is a powerful motivator
And a powerful tool to aid us in our decision making
It helps to clarify how we’re going to invest our time and money
It really determines how we’re going to spend our lives

Nehemiah was a Jew serving in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes I about 445 BC
Why was a Jew serving in the court of a Persian king?
Well, because in the century before, the Babylonians had overthrown Jerusalem and carried off many of its wealthy and educated citizens
But when the Babylonians fell to the Persians, waves of Jews began to return home
They had rebuilt their Temple, but conditions in the city itself were terrible – it was sparsely populated, people were really struggling to feed themselves and the defensive wall was still broken down
Nehemiah’s brother came to visit him from Jerusalem – an incredibly long journey in those days – from Israel to Iran. And when Nehemiah asks how things are going back home, the report he gets is: “not good.” Nehemiah is so moved by the plight of his people that he spends several days weeping and fasting and praying. At this point, he knows one thing: he can’t let this go. The issue is too personal for him. He knows he’s being called to help, but he’s not sure how. That’s why he fasts and prays – he’s seeking a vision from God about how he can help.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been in that situation before. Where you heard about a need and felt so overwhelmed that you knew you had to do something? I’ve definitely been there. But the problem, sometimes is “what do you want me to do? What can I realistically do?”

Because at times I’ve had that feeling of being overwhelmed with a need, and then realizing that I’m not the one who can solve the problem. That I may have the passion, but I don’t have the skills or resources or connections to do what needs doing. And that sounds like a cop-out, because God can certainly provide all those things – you may have heard it that “God doesn’t call the equipped, he equips the called” – maybe.

But when you read the scriptures, you realize that the most effective leaders God ever called were very clearly the people for the job. Consider Moses, who led his people out of slavery in Egypt. He’s called because he grew up in the household of Pharaoh – so when he keeps arguing that he’s not the right guy for the job – God brushes his arguments aside and sends him anyway. Now it’s true that sometimes we don’t see ourselves as right for the job. But that’s part of the reason for the church – to help us to see in our own blind spots and be encouraged to do those things God has for us to do.
Here, Nehemiah needs no convincing
He’s certain he’s the one to help
He’s the king’s wine-taster – an important household servant
He realizes he has an inside track to get something done – he only needs
direction and discernment about what to do

Finally, he realizes that he should ask to be sent to rebuild the city himself
He considers what he’ll need for the job and he asks for it:
“I’ll need letters to the governors of the territories I’ll cross to make sure no
one interferes
I’ll need timber from the king’s personal stores
I’ll need a military escort to ensure my safety”
The king grants him everything he asks for, and he sets off

The rest of the book of Nehemiah tells the story of how he gets the work
done – he does succeed in all he tries to do
Not only does he solve the problem of the wall, but he also corrects a
number of abuses of the poor that were happening in the city
He becomes the de facto governor of Jerusalem

So you have this deep emotional connection to an issue, here the plight of
the people of Jerusalem
You have this discernment process in prayer that asks a few questions:
“Am I the right person for the job?”
“What are you calling me to do?”
“What will I need to do it?”
From these three questions, his vision becomes clear and he knows
exactly what he has to do

We look at people who do great things and we stand in awe
But in reality they are no different than you or me
They may be particularly smart or skilled in a particular area
But I believe all of us are experts at something
We may say we don’t have time, but they have only 24 hours in a day,
same as us
The thing is, they have a vision – a clear vision, an x-ray vision
And they have the passion that will not let them rest until they see it through
They see clear steps on the path, and they won’t take ‘no’ for an answer

There’s a quote that I first heard in seminary that has to do with vocation

It’s from Frederick Buechner, an author and Presbyterian pastor
“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

So the “deep hunger” is that emotional connection to a particular need
The “deep gladness” is about determining that you are indeed the right person for the job
I believe all of us can be superheroes if we can just find that intersection – where the thing we love to do meets the thing that must be done

A few years ago, a young woman who is a student at NYU had a flash of that kind of insight

Mansi Prakash was with her family visiting a small town in India
And she saw that while many of the houses had electricity, most people either used candles or sat in the dark at night because they couldn’t afford the electricity
She realized that what was happening was life was stopping when the sun went down
Kids weren’t studying after dark
Any income-producing work that was happening in the home ended at dark
So many opportunities missed
And all for the lack of electric light

So she began thinking: what if we could make light cheaper?
What if we replaced people’s inefficient incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs?
CFLs use only about ¼ the energy of incandescents
So she began a small nonprofit to distribute CFLs in developing countries – it’s called Brighter Today

She found a sponsor in Philips, who provides most of the bulbs, as well as recognition from various philanthropic and other organizations
And now she’s beginning work on a new venture to bring solar-powered lighting into locations that are off the grid
The best visions are very clear – x-ray clear
Nehemiah knew he wanted to build a wall
Mansi Prakash knew she wanted to bring people light

What vision is God stirring up in you?
What vision have you been trying to run away from?

Nehemiah’s vision encompassed a whole city
The vision was personal, but everyone got involved – there was a piece of it for everyone

Can you imagine a church where even 5 people identified God’s vision for their lives and ministries and started living into it?
5 superheroes…Can you imagine what we could do together?
Can you imagine what a difference that would make?

Go forth this week to see
The place where the world’s deep hunger and your deep gladness meet
That’s where God needs you

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

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1. The ancient city of Susa is located near Shush, Iran. It’s in the far west of the country. See it on a map [here](http://www.brightertoday.org/).  
2. For example, the fact that lenders were charging interest! Read Nehemiah 5.  