

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • October 10, 2021**



**The Scripture**  
**Nehemiah 4:15-20**

*When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work.*

*From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us.”*

**The Message**  
**“Jesus, for Real: What If the World Has a Front Porch?”**  
**Mark Briley**

I have an image seared into my mind of my grandfather sitting on the front porch of my grandparents’ home in Macon, Missouri, in the 1990s. It was a postage-stamp- sized concrete porch that served as the gateway to their postage-stamped-sized home with mint green siding. I remember the day they glued down that miniature-golf-style indoor/outdoor carpet on that concrete stoop. Grandpa loved that porch. He would have a glass of tea and sit in his plastic lawn chair and just wait for neighborhood kids or walkers to pass by. Nobody had their heads buried in their phones when they passed nor earbuds in as a clear signal to say, “*I ain’t got time to acknowledge your*

presence.” Everybody stopped, chatted, and likely popped up to the porch to get a fresh cookie or brownie Grandpa had made before posting up on the porch for the day.

It was that same decade that country singer, Tracy Lawrence, released his hit song, “*If the World Had a Front Porch*,”<sup>1</sup> and I got what he was chasing after. The song started like this...

*It was where my mama sat on that old swing with her crochet  
It was where granddaddy taught me how to cuss and how to pray  
It was where we made our own ice cream, those sultry summer nights  
Where the bulldog had her puppies, and us brothers had our fights  
There were many nights I'd sit right there and look out at the stars  
To the sound of a distant whippoorwill or the hum of a passing car  
It was where I first got up the nerve to steal me my first kiss  
And it was where I learned to play guitar and pray, I had the gift  
If the world had a front porch like we did back then  
We'd still have our problems, but we'd all be friends  
Treating your neighbor like he's your next of kin  
Wouldn't be gone with the wind  
If the world had a front porch, like we did back then.*

And we are apt to reminisce this way, right? If we could just get back to those front porches of old where wisdom was imparted, corn was shucked, and the steady squeak of a porch swing paced just so to the rhythm of your own heartbeat. Simpler times, we think. Fewer problems. More civility. Nostalgia makes this so even if it wasn't as pristine as we remember.

Few would argue, however, that we're living in some of the craziest times any of us can remember. If we could just get back to that porch – where the light was always left on after dark so we could find our way home. Or old farmhouses in the winter, when blizzards came through, farmers would tie a rope from the front porch to the barn so that they wouldn't get lost between the two in the storm. You could tether yourself to the rope and get back to the front porch and into the house safely.

We're living in a chaotic season – one man even defined the season as a blizzard he acronymed (*if you'll allow me to make acronym a verb*) CPR – COVID, Political Idolatry, and Radical Hostility. These are just among the fully-public blizzards. We're all living in our own snow globes that are being shaken every which way making it hard to see anything in front of us. Your personal blizzard on top of all the external pressures

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrAJS8wBd1A>

may be a marriage you're trying desperately to save. It may be getting old(er) and the frustrating surprises that come with having a human body. It may be a job that you want to get out of but can't afford to make the shift.

So, we're swimming in depression, or anxiety, or are self-medicating, and heartache just seems closer to the surface than it used to. My kid's voice and piano teacher in Tulsa shared with us this week that her dear son, Sam, who is in his twenties suddenly died of a massive brain hemorrhage. A baseball teammate of my 12-year-old nephew in Kansas City died at his own hand this week. 11-12 years old. If we took the time to go around the room today, one after another we could stand and share a similar story. We're living untethered lives... no porch light left on; no rope to guide us through the chaos.

Where is the Church in this mix, we wonder? The real Jesus, living in the swirl of humanity's struggles, said, "*You are like a front porch light.*" The Church is to shine a way home. We become a human tether that our friends and neighbors and coworkers can hold onto and find a way home. This has long been the truth of the people of God. We rally in the hard times. We bring hope into the darkness. And while we are the *Body of Christ* – the Church is the *people* and not a building – sometimes our metaphorical front porch – our welcome to the world – comes in physical spaces, in color, in the tangible push of an automatic door-opener on the front porch of our facility at 2601 West Broadway. Its why, through our visioning process, our facility came up often as something worthy of consideration.

A *facility* is designed to *facilitate* the purpose held within its walls. Our facility, then is to facilitate ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. While we know, as I said before, the Church is the people and the people dispersed out in the world, *place* matters. The sacredness of "*being together in one place*" has long been a marker of people of faith. We see this faithful gathering throughout Scripture.

How a facility welcomes, and functions sends a message to those embedded in the community as to what happens "*there.*" Broadway's facility has shifted, changed, been added to and more over the decades as the needs of the community grew. Our vision team asked questions of the congregation. "*How is our current facility facilitating the ministry we feel called to in our current day blizzard? What do the growing needs of a growing community call for today?*" These questions rose enough that it was identified in our Priority Action Plan as one of six Action Teams needed to discern these questions further. This Action Team's charge? **Create an Inviting Front Porch + Examine Needs for Facility Enhancement.** We're calling it the *Front Porch Action Team* for short. This need is not new. It goes waaaayyy back.

Enter Nehemiah, our Action-Team partner today. We find him in a book of the Bible in the Old, or First Testament that bears his name. It's really Nehemiah's memoir that could easily be a Netflix series starring Jason Bateman in the lead role. It's a blizzard of a season. The Jewish people had been mostly scattered as part of the Babylonian exile. Their homes and city were decimated, and the remnants were left in a depressing heap. Their news broadcasts every morning were kind of like ours – *"Here's why today is going to be terrible."* Nehemiah was working as a government official in Persia. He was making a life and getting by, but his heart was still back home in Jerusalem where his ancestors were buried, and he learned about life on the front porch of his family home. As his memoir opens, we find Nehemiah inquiring about the Jews who had survived the exile back home.

It's like when I run into someone from Macon and we have that whole exchange, *"You been back there in a while?" "Been a bit." "How's so-and-so doing?" "Did you hear about the Toastmasters building?" "Got to get back to The Pear Tree soon for some onion rings."* You know how it goes.

Nehemiah, bumping into some folks from back home in the grocery store says, *"How are things back home?"* And they say, *"Miah it's bad. People are messed up, discouraged, and the city's in disrepair. Morale is terrible. I'm not sure what can really be done."* Nehemiah holds it together enough to get around the corner to the cereal aisle, and he loses it holding a box of *Cap'n Crunch*. Doesn't grief hit you in the strangest places sometimes? He writes in his memoir: *"I sat down and wept."* And he mourned for days; staying in bed, eating Ben & Jerry's, and watching re-runs of Fixer Upper. It finally hit him in a way he couldn't contain any more – and this is an edge I think many of us are tiptoeing on right now.

But this doesn't last long for Miah. You can get bitter, or you can get better, and he's made up his mind. Nehemiah, tethered to his Jewish heritage and his home city of Jerusalem, decides he's going to go home and lead the big rebuild – rebuild their morale, rebuild their spiritual life, and he's going to start by rebuilding the front porch to the city so the people can regain their pride and their hope. He's turning in his good gig with the government to become a general contractor to do the sacred work of rebuilding. He makes the trek home and begins to rally people from all walks of life to share in the effort. It was more than building a wall or a new front porch, it was sign and symbol of their resilient faith. It's all about knowing your *why*.

We build a front porch and improve our facilities because caring for the physical is caring for the spiritual, too. If a facility is in disrepair or doesn't speak to present day needs or shares in its very fabric the weariness of time with a clear heyday of decades ago – it sets a tone for the Spirit's work within, too. Nehemiah's people, living in the rubble and shadows of their own heyday, start to let their spirits slip, too. They're

discouraged and tired with no real motivation to press ahead. The physical and spiritual go hand in hand. But Nehemiah comes in and says, “*Hey – let’s remember who we are and who we are called to be. I’ll bring my gifts, you bring yours and let’s build together.*”

And his memoir tells the story. One at a time, people of every stripe in life come alongside and join the rebuilding effort. It’s a fascinating account as you see morale and color come back bit by bit. Chapter 3, Miah tells it plainly. “*[They people] were up for the task, getting to work on the Sheep Gate; they repaired it and hung its doors, continuing on as far as the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho worked alongside them; and next to them, Zaccur, son of Imri. The Fish Gate was built by the Hassenaah brothers; they repaired it, hung its doors and installed its bolts and bars. Meremoth, son of Uriah, worked next to them.*” A couple of verses later it calls out one guy who didn’t like to get his hands dirty. But it goes on and on like this – name after name. People kept showing up, getting involved in something tangible that was reflective of their renewed spirit. We will live again. We will serve again. We will build together, and others will find the tether in whatever blizzard they are in and find their way to our front porch, too. And what happens on the front porch? *Connection. Fellowship. Prayer. Wisdom-sharing. Healing.* Nehemiah brought in Ezra to partner in the rebuild – he was the teacher who helped people engage the Scriptures. They were building spaces and building spirits, too.

This is why our *Front Porch Action Team* is launching now. It’s not about fancy buildings and massive structures; it’s about building spirits from a porch that truly facilitates ministry. This can come in some short term, moderate term and long term goals. There are opportunities today to demonstrate outside of our facility that some new life-transformation is happening on the inside. Our newly defined core values of *Broad Hearts, Broad Minds, and Broad Reach*, along with our tagline, “*Where Love Leads*,” made visible outside, may incline folks who have driven by here for years but paid no attention a reason to go to our website and see what new is happening here. Vibrancy speaks of new life and encourages curiosity which is the first step toward faith. These might be some immediate considerations of the Action Team.

A moderate-term consideration, for example, may be our church basement. Did you know we have a church basement? Some of you will recall, years ago, when it served as Sunday School and fellowship space, even youth space for a time but now it hosts hundreds of neighbors from the community each week who are a part of our five recovery groups. Our Burmese friends use that space weekly for worship and study. One of my favorite parts of Sunday morning are the moments in and out of my office which is just above the basement as I hear our friends praying passionately in their native language one minute and a children’s choir the next minute belting out in English better than mine, “*This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine!*” And they are

shining! But I'll be honest; the space is pretty rough. Could we partner together and brighten that front porch – the place for which souls and bodies are healing, transforming, and praising God?

And longer term, could we envision improved spaces for our youngest Disciples at Broadway – who currently occupy the oldest parts of our building that by today's codes would require some needed updates. Could we help people know where the main entrance really is and welcome them not immediately upon entry with a solid wall but an open and inviting expansive space that may partner with a local agency brewing fair trade coffee and employing our beloved neighbors who struggle to find employment given history, ability, or otherwise. How could we help people flourish through the very welcome of our facility, freshly designed to do just that? Who knows what could be envisioned and uncovered in prayerful process... but our hope is that we might help people find a way through the blizzard, have an encounter with the real Jesus and, in turn, transform an entire city?

Our story can bear a resemblance of Nehemiah's rebuild: Stansberry brought his gift and came alongside Brumfield, and they led the charge. The Muzzy's came alongside and designed a space more welcoming and conducive for a Recovery group, who all joined in the effort, too; treasuring their space where they come to heal their owned struggles. Audie, who knew a thing or two about interiors, warmed the space in such a way that people felt more at home than ever before. The Davis,' years spent on their knees teaching children, helped envision right spaces for today's toddlers who will later tell their own stories of Chuck and BB and the rooms where they first heard the stories of Jesus. Crews, who had been raised by this church came alongside Welty, and they pulled together the youth space that was now imparting the faith to Mike's own kids. Cheryl and Jennifer came alongside knowing that even getting into the building is an act of spiritual courage, and they added to the master plan a clear, well-lit entry that all on its very own made a statement to the community, *"We long for you to feel safe here, welcomed here, affirmed here, treasured here. We want you to grow with us here and then leave here encouraged to be the very nature of Christ in the world where you live every day."*

This not only happened for Nehemiah and his community, but we see it throughout the New Testament... where the early Church, inspired forward by the presence of Jesus in their lives, gathered on the front porch of the Temple – Solomon's Portico as it was called – to refresh themselves, reset their plans, do the work of their collective Call together and then disperse again to bring transformation to others. What happened? People flocked to them in this effort. It was getting crazy in the Book of Acts. Chapter four, Peter and John can hardly keep up with the passion of the Spirit. People were hungry for this new flavor of faith. They wanted to learn and receive, and the early leaders were forming teams and sending them out. They used the temple porch as

home base. It was like their airport. An airport is only meaningful because of where it can send you... but you still have to have a place from which to launch, and that launch site matters. Anyway – thousands of people are getting on board the Jesus plane. The religious leaders, scholars, temple police – everybody who was anybody in the religious sphere got together to try to put an end to this whole Jesus movement.

Arrested for doing Jesus-y things, Peter and John find themselves encircled by these religious folks, who couldn't believe the kind of influence they were having. Talking about these two, the leaders were all – *“What do we really know about these guys? Did any of you go to seminary with them? Are they in that Business Networking Coffee Group that meets at the Toasty Goat? What do we know about their folks? Who did they vote for in the last election?”*

They couldn't believe these non-formally educated men – just John from the Gym and Pete from the Playground are making this kind of impact from the front porch of their own Temple? And here's what's most notable – right there in Acts Chapter 4 it says, *“They noted John and Peter had been with Jesus.”* That was the only thing they could imagine responsible for the transformation of their space and their community right before their eyes.

Can that be said of us, Broadway? When people encounter you and me, do they note that we have been with Jesus? I wonder this sometimes. And I know I don't always live up to that description. I hope it isn't said, *“They noted he had been with that political pundit.”* Or, *“They noted she had been with that social media influencer.”* And I thought, Ooo... are we more known for our political stances, our conspiracy theories, and what we're against... or are we more known for having been with Jesus?

Let's tie a rope to our front porch, Broadway, one that extends to every neighbor in this city who is caught in a blizzard and seeking a way home. Let's come alongside each other, with whatever gift is ours to bring and take pride in our facility that facilitates healing, affirmation, transformation, accountability, faith formation, fellowship, and most of all – a relationship with Jesus, for real.

## **Song of Focus**

### ***“This Holy Place”***

WORDS AND MUSIC: ED VARNUM

1. Much more than a building, God,  
we thank you for this place,  
for here we've known your blessing,  
the wonder of your grace.  
We've shared here as one family  
in fellowship and love,

in faith and hope and blessed peace  
apart from this world's pace.

2. We've heard the gospel stories  
here of Jesus' love for all  
and gave our lives to that great love,  
responding to your call.

In these baptismal waters,  
lives were raised to life anew,  
joined with Christ to then reach out  
beyond these sacred halls.

3. We thank you for this house of faith,  
more than brick and stone.  
Through people here you touched our lives,  
no more to be alone.

Here, couples were united,  
brought their children to be blessed.  
And here, we released our loved ones  
to their eternal home.

4. We thank you for this holy place,  
which for decades heard our prayer,  
filled with joyful songs of praise,  
concerns and joys were shared.  
We open doors to welcome all,  
God make us such a place  
attracting everyone to know  
your perfect love and care.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH