

Sheltering God

Nehemiah 8:1-18

June 19, 2016

I've been thinking about forts and temporary structures this week. It's mostly related to preparing for this sermon, but it's also related to the events in the last week or so, in our world and in our conference. The news coming from Orlando has been disturbing on so many levels, the most obvious one being gun violence, but another related one is the safety—physical, emotional and spiritual safety—of our LGBTQ friends and loved ones. If the world isn't a safe place for them, is the church? Is it a shelter they can count on? What do we do with a peace theology that says every human being as a creation of God has a right to life, and a theology of human sexuality that has kept some people from living out the full expression of their humanity? The tent we are currently in is an uncomfortable place to be.

I also carried the image of shelter with me to the IN-MI Mennonite Conference Annual Sessions, held this weekend in Elkhart at the seminary. Nehemiah 8:9-10 was one of the scriptures used in worship at IN-MI Mennonite Conference this weekend. The theme was "Restore our Joy/Restore Us, O God." The times of worship, hearing stories from the congregations who call Elkhart home, and spending time at work around tables and in informal conversation, all of these provided a bit of a temporary shelter from the normal routine.

I was reminded as well, that shelters sometimes are built in response to very difficult circumstances. I thought back to a difficult process of discernment that I was a part of in another church. We had just heard the story of a refugee family from Colombia, who had been denied refugee status, and had gone into hiding, and were at that point, past their date of deportation. Their story was heart-wrenching, and there was a deep desire to respond in some way. Someone suggested that we use our church building to provide sanctuary for this family, a temporary shelter, a temporary solution, while we also worked to advocate for a residency permit for them.

This suggestion led to months of difficult and painful conversation about whether or not to provide sanctuary. After months of discussion and discernment, there was a very narrow majority vote not to provide sanctuary. It was a painful day in

the life of the congregation. But what grew out of that decision was a working group of people from all sides of the issue, who did in fact, successfully get a residency permit for this family; another family in the church let them secretly live in their basement apartment, essentially providing sanctuary themselves. Everyone had agreed that we as a congregation should respond to this need—that was unanimous; we just didn't agree on what the response should be. And we also realized, that we hadn't even asked the family directly if they wanted be in sanctuary in our church building. Turns out, they had been praying that they wouldn't have to go into sanctuary in the church! I guess we know whose prayers God answered! 😊

At the Friday evening worship service, Cyneatha Millsaps, who grew up in south central Elkhart, and now pastors a church in Chicago, preached. In her sermon, she talked about how God covers our mistakes—the mistakes we make as individuals, as pastors and as congregations. I think the story of the refugee family is just such a time when God covered our congregational mistake of not listening well to each other and to this family. We stumbled along the way, but in spite of that, the outcome of keeping a family safe, and creating a way for them to live in Canada was achieved. Several different temporary shelters were created along the way until a more permanent shelter could be attained.

We are living in a deeply divided world and church. We find ourselves in a time of transition, uncertain about the future—our future, the church's future, the future of the world. As the world and the church become more uncertain, it is tempting to hold to the familiar structures, policies and beliefs; these give some of us a sense of peace, of reassurance that while the mountains may shake and the earth changes, at least these things are solid and true. We want beliefs and policies that are clear, that define who we are, what we believe, and where the boundaries are. It is normal, in a time of change and uncertainty, to want to cling to clarity.

The people of Nehemiah and Ezra's day were also trying to find clarity and hope in a time of transition. They have returned from their Babylonian exile and they are trying to remember who they once were and figure out who they are now. They realize in returning home that they are not the same people they once were; they have to figure out what it means to be God's people, in this place again, and in this time now, given what they have been through in exile and who they have

become in exile. They may be returning home, but they are not the same people who left.

The 2 books of Ezra and Nehemiah are really one book, and read together they are a journey of discovery, looking back on how the community began, and struggling with the return home to Judah and what it means to live and obey the Law of Moses. They need to rebuild the city and the temple and keep themselves pure in the midst of foreign people. (*The Learning Bible*, p. 837) They are a community in disarray and conflict. Their internal conflict is as much an enemy to their survival as their external enemies. They struggle to know who is in and who is out—the book of Ezra ends with the Israelite men sending away their foreign wives and the children born to those foreign wives, because associating with foreigners was seen as sinful; that must have been incredibly painful for those families; they struggle to agree on how their community should be rebuilt. They had to learn their history, and get in touch with their identity before the exile, in order to figure out if that identity still held true, or how it could be re-imagined in light of their new situation. (*Feasting on the Word*, Vol 1, Year C, p. 267, Kathleen M. O'Connor)

As we read this chapter in Nehemiah, it is a picture of an earlier people reading scripture. This is a passage about what happens when the scripture is read in the midst of the people. As the people heard the scripture read and interpreted, it causes them to weep and mourn. They are told that this day was holy, a day set aside for eating and drinking and giving to those who had nothing. This was a day holy to the Lord, not a day of mourning and weeping. This is a day not for grief, but to know that the “joy of the Lord is their strength.”

As part of the reading of scripture, they discover that they are to go out and make booths and live in them. These booths are temporary dwellings, reminding them of the temporary dwellings God provided for them in the wilderness. They are reminders of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that surrounded, led and protected the Israelites for their 40 years of wilderness wanderings. These booths are made from what grows around them—myrtle, palm, olive branches. As they build these temporary shelters, these dwelling places that haven't been built since the time of entering the land of Canaan, the people rejoice. And for 8 days, they celebrated and listened to the reading of the law of God.

There is for these new hearers of scripture, a profound encounter with the living God. Scripture is read, they worship, and God is present. In their worship, they have a profound encounter with God—they know they have entered into God's presence, and that experience causes them to weep—was it for joy, or sorrow or regret? We don't know, but they are quickly told that this is a day of celebration, not weeping. The reading of scripture is the centre of their worship. And worship transforms their lives. They are able to see themselves for who they are, and experience God's presence in their lives. (*Feasting on the Word*, Vol 1, Year C, p. 268, W. Carter Lester)

There is something about being removed from the normal routines of life that opens us up to new revelations and new encounters with God. Hearing scripture, building temporary shelters and living in them, drew the people in, in a way that regular life couldn't. In this experience, they are given back their identity as God's people. In these temporary shelters, they encounter the God who is always with them, and they have what they need to be the people they are called to be.

The beauty and the challenge of the temporary shelters, is that they are temporary; you have to leave them; this is not a place to stay permanently. It's a shelter for one week of every year, to remind them who they are; to remember who God is and how God cares for them; but then they need to move back into their regular dwellings and continue with the work of their daily lives. The lessons learned and remembered in the temporary shelter are to go with them, just as God continues to journey with them.

It's interesting that the Festival of Booths, or Sukkoth, as it is called by the Jewish faithful today, takes place in the fall, when the weather is turning. The shelters that are built are not adequate to withstand the weather for a long time. They serve a particular function for a particular time, but they are not intended to be permanent.

Temporary shelters are risky places to be. They are fine on days where the weather is good—it can even be quite pleasant, even on a cool, fall day, to eat in a temporary shelter if the sun is shining. But if the weather turns, there isn't much protection in those temporary shelters.

By moving into a temporary shelter, the people in Nehemiah's day, and the Jewish people today, have to make themselves vulnerable, remembering their wilderness wanderings, when life was out of their control, when their very existence was at the mercy of God. Moving into a temporary shelter means that we have to make ourselves vulnerable, let go of control; we have to relax a bit about life and ourselves, and trust that God is in control—we have to let God be in control. It's kind of like the Sabbath; the gift of the Sabbath is that in our rest, we trust that God is holding the world and us and we don't have to do anything.

Moving into a temporary shelter requires us to relax, let go and trust that we, our loved ones, and maybe even our church are in God's hands.

I wonder, in this time in the life of our church and denomination, what temporary shelters might be needed? Is this an image that might be helpful for us as we approach life and decisions and faith together? After all, no one structure or format for the church should be seen as permanent. Just as the people of Nehemiah's day had to re-imagine who they were in their time, so too, we might need to re-imagine who we are for this time. How might this image of a temporary shelter aid us in finding our way? Being reminded that God has been with The Church from its beginnings, and that God will continue to be with the church in its future is an important part of being able to build temporary shelters.

IN-MI as a conference is not a temporary shelter, but in this time of uncertainty and congregations leaving, they are trying to think creatively about ways and places where we can come together as a community of churches. This isn't the first time in our history as a conference that we faced challenges. There's a new history book which will be in the church library, that outlines the other times in our history when we've faced disagreements and division.

These Annual Sessions provided a temporary shelter where we came together to remember who we are, and how God is with us. I certainly learned a bit more about who we are as a conference as I heard stories about other congregations and how God is at work. New Foundation United in Christ Mennonite Church, in south central Elkhart, has placed that community under the shelter of God. They led some of us on a prayer walk yesterday morning, their weekly practice. They stop and pray at places where young people were shot; they anoint stop signs and hope that as people stop at that corner, they will stop and think about their lives;

they see God active and at work in Washington Gardens, particularly when there's a Saturday when no violence occurs—their prayers worked that day.

I think IN-MI is trying to find a shelter that will carry us through this time of uncertainty and division in the church. Getting to know the congregations in our conference is one such way of trying to live under the same shelter. One of the shelters that is being proposed is that we find new ways of being conference together; that each congregation and pastor sign a covenant for how we will practice our faith together. Some suggestions for shared practices are also being considered, along with the encouragement for congregations to find ways of coming together to strengthen our relationships with each other. Some of this is already happening for us here at Berkey: we have just finished a week of Vacation Bible School with other Mennonite congregations in Goshen; we work with Waterford Mennonite Church and College Mennonite Church to resource and train Stephen Ministers. These are connections that grow naturally out of our ministries. The encouragement is for us to keep those connections, and to find even more ways to connect; and perhaps even to connect with congregations who are quite different from us.

These suggestions aren't radical; the practices that are being suggested aren't new practices, but central to the life of most congregations—worship, Bible study, prayer, hospitality; these have been with us from the beginning. Perhaps the radical part of the proposal is the invitation to share the shelter with those with whom we disagree, and to share the shelter joyfully together. The radical invitation is to look around us and see how God is at work in our own congregation, and in other congregations. If the joy of the Lord is truly our strength, as Nehemiah says, then let's come together with joy, even in the midst of pain and loss, knowing that God arrived before us and will remain with us.

There's no reassurance that a temporary shelter will be comfortable; in fact, being in a temporary shelter is risky; it might be a bit leaky and crowded; we might have to eat with someone who thinks differently than we do. But the church has always been such a risky, uncomfortable shelter for those who follow Jesus. Following Jesus has never been a comfortable, safe way of life. But the stories from the wilderness; the stories from Nehemiah show again and again that God is a God who provides and cares for us; God is a God who shelters us in our uncertainty and fear.

My hope is that we will experience the shelter of this loving God, and in so doing, be the shelter for each other. My prayer is that we will embody the love of Jesus who welcomed all to come to him. May we be that shelter of safety and acceptance for all, in the midst of all the questions that divide us. May we be the place where all of us can come as we are and know we are safe in the shelter of God and each other.