

January 24, 2016  
Third Sunday after Epiphany

**“What Are We Doing Here?”**  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 ~ Luke 4:14-21

One of the best days I ever spent was with the people of Babcock, Wisconsin on the day of the picnic celebrating the re-opening of their church. It was a warm and humid Saturday afternoon (by Wisconsin standards). Folks from age 3 to 96 filled the church yard along with the fantastic fragrance of barbeque. Picnic tables overflowed the tasty covered dishes and delicious desserts.

But as much as I loved the food, my favorite part of the day was when we gathered under the tent to listen to the members of the Babcock church. They talked about teaching Sunday school in that building for sixty years ... they talked about being baptized and married there ... they talked about the funerals of their loved ones ... they talked about the despair they felt when the church had been forced to close ... and they talked about the joy they felt upon its rebirth in their lives. There wasn't a dry eye among them, and I cried like a baby too.

It had been my privilege to be a part of the resurrection of that 165 year old church almost from the beginning. Our Conference Minister at that time, David Moyer, asked me to go with him to see the church and to meet with some of the women to discuss the feasibility of getting it restarted. I was serving the church in Nekoosa and Babcock was about 12 miles away. So, on a cold winter Monday morning (even by Wisconsin standards) we made the short trip. As soon as I saw the church I fell in love with it...it looked just like the one on “Little Houses on the Prairie.” But I wasn't too optimistic about what the conditions would be like on the inside, after being closed for so long. I envisioned lots of cobwebs and mice scurrying into corners, but it looked as if services had been held there just the day before. It was spotless ... not a cobweb in sight nor a speck of dust for that matter. No musty smell, no dingy altar cloths, no dirty floors ... *miraculously*, it just sparkled and shined. And it *was* a miracle ... a miracle of love and faith and hope. For almost ten years, four women (none of them under 75) had taken it upon themselves to keep the church ready for the next worship service ... whenever that day came. The men of the church (none of them under 80) had kept the grounds mowed and the flowerbeds weeded each and every summer.

Can you imagine that kind of faith? I know that it's awfully easy to take things for granted, even our church...this place we've made our spiritual home. We think that it will always be here...whether we're here or not. Like most of the best gifts of life, we don't miss it until we lose it.

The people of Israel lost it. Formed by the Exodus ... shaped by God in the forge of the wilderness into a peculiar people ... they were a bunch of slaves who became the people of God. They built a nation. They built a homeland. They built a Temple where God lived at the heart of

the people. Israel had it all together. But they blew it. They took God for granted. They divided their loyalties. They wasted their inheritance. They ignored the poor. So they went into exile. They lost everything. In 587 B.C.E. the Babylonians burned their homes, trampled their fields, tore down their city walls, and destroyed the temple where God had lived in their midst. They dragged most of the citizens off as captives to their capital city, Babylon, nearly 600 miles away as the crow flies, farther by the ancient roads ... and it might as well have been Mars.

After the Exodus, the Babylonian Exile was the most important experience of spiritual formation for the people of God. You might call the exile their Re-formation. A lot of people died. And a lot of people just gave up. But a core of faithful souls refused to let go. They realized what was precious after they had lost it. They gathered up all their sacred stories and put them in one book, which became the first five books of our Bible. And they learned. They learned that judgment begins with God's own people. They learned that their God was not just the God of the winners, but the God who loves the losers, too. They learned that their God was not just God in Jerusalem ... but also God in Babylon ... and the one and only God of the whole world. They learned that their God does not abandon people, but forgives and restores and lets us begin again.

Fifty years after the arrogant Babylonians dragged the Israelites away, the Persians defeated the Babylonians and told these exiles they could go home. Some stayed. They had built a new life in a new land. But a faithful core came home and rebuilt the walls and the Temple and the nation. It was tough going. Almost fifty years later, a priest by the name of Ezra came back from Babylon, and he brought with him this book of Israel's collected God stories. They called it "the Torah." And Ezra, the priest, was the first person to be called "rabbi." And as we learned in today's reading from the book of Nehemiah, Ezra and his cohorts called the people together at the public square inside the Water Gate of the new wall. Unlike the temple ... where men and women and children and Gentile foreigners were divided up and restricted in their access ... they let everybody come together and hear the Word of God that day ... women, children, strangers, everybody. Everybody!

It was a dramatic moment. Ezra stood up on a raised platform where everybody could see him. When he opened the scroll of the Torah, the people spontaneously leapt to their feet ... perhaps to hear better ... more likely out of awe and hope and hunger. Ezra blessed the Lord, and the people cried "Amen! Amen!" They lifted their hands in the ancient gesture of prayer ... then they bowed their heads down to the ground in the ancient gesture of worship ... all of them together. Then Ezra read the scripture out loud to the gathered assembly. He read it and then explained what it meant ... not only because many had forgotten Hebrew ... but because the timeless words had a timely meaning for their moment in history which he applied through interpretation. We call that preaching today.

It was a worship service, like this one we're sharing today! Only, the people were hungry, they were starving for a word from God. And when they heard the word again ... those wonderful stories ... and some of them for the first time ... they burst out in tears! But the leaders said, "Don't cry. Don't cry! This is the Lord's day. Go home and eat a big Sunday dinner! And don't forget to share with those who don't have enough. This is the Lord's day. Don't mourn and weep, but eat, drink, and be merry ... because rejoicing in the Lord is your strength!" Remember

that image we heard from the Bible last week ... the church as a wedding party, a feast, a festival of faith? "Rejoicing in the Lord is your strength!"

This story about worship at the Water Gate almost moves me to tears when I read it...but as you know, I'm a cheap weep! Imagine being that hungry for worship ... for the Word of God ... for the community of the Spirit. I'm glad they remembered the story. Just like in Genesis one ... where God's words form the creation ... in Nehemiah, God's words create the community. I love the inclusivity, how they make a special point of saying the women were there, too. Men and women, young and old, these are real flesh and blood people like you and me. Don't you just see their faces, their varied dress, their different heights and body shapes and bearing? Friends they called by name. Saints they remembered ... a community of the Spirit ... the reconstituted people of God.

They had rebuilt the walls. They had rebuilt their homes. They would rebuild the Temple. But those were just buildings. On this day, through worship, they rebuilt the soul of Israel ... the people of God ... and the people wept and laughed and prayed and sang. And isn't that why we come here on Sundays?

What else are we doing here? What are we trying to accomplish? The church feeds the hungry, but social agencies feed the hungry, too, and without all the ritual. The church has programs for children, but the schools have programs for children and they have more resources to spend on them. The church provides counseling, but trained therapists provide counseling and they have had years and years of education. The church offers study and training, but colleges and seminaries offer study and training, and will give you more depth. The church has a nice building, but other institutions have nice buildings. The church has and must have all these things, but almost everything you get at church you can get from another place, with higher specialization and fancier facilities.

So what are we doing here? What in the world is going on? What are we trying to accomplish? We are building a community! We are trying to be the people of God! The church is a community in which scripture is regularly recounted and listened to ... and through which God is present. It really isn't about isolated individual spirituality because within the scriptural story, the theme of community is sounded repeatedly. And in places like our church, the story is recounted in many different ways. Beloved, that is because we don't all hear it the same way or even the same way every time. The church tells us who we are since we inhabit this story as the definitive story of our lives. Our many programs and activities have as their goal making the scripture come to life in our own place and time. We are called into the community of God because we have this sense that God has brought us here and that God forms us into a distinctive people. And while we also participate as individuals in other communities ... the church is our normative, priority community ... because being church informs and even shapes who we are in those other communities in which we participate.

Of course we fail because we are human ... we build new idols, we hurt each other's feelings, we even oppress certain groups, and so we must constantly live by the judgment and mercy. We proclaim, *ekklesia reformata semper reformanda*, as the Protestant motto puts it ... "the church

reformed, always needing reformation." What all of that describes is a community like no other, which is not the *object* of faith but the *instrument* of faith and mission.

Growing up my children had a variety of pets. We had the usual cats and dogs, but we also had lots of snakes and lizards and big hairy spiders and stuff. We lived in the country so a lot of them were local, but when we went to the coast our son would usually come home with hermit crabs. Our daughter Mary Cate and I didn't always see eye to eye, but on this one thing we were in total agreement ... we don't like hermit crabs. JR would keep them on top of his chest of drawers in a big fishbowl right next to the ant farm. The ants were a flurry of activity ... they were always working together, every ant with a plan doing something to help all the other ants in the tunnels. Busy, busy, each doing its part, but for the sake of the whole. Not those crabs. They were going this way and that ... bumping into each other ... crawling over each other ... pushing at each other ... but every one in its own shell ... every crab for himself ... which is why I think they were so crabby.

We live in a hyper-individualistic age. Society praises those who are independent, self-standing, and strong. And we wind up exiled, lonely and alone. But the Bible calls us to community. In community we are affirmed and our gifts blossom in helping others. In community we are confronted and learn to grow beyond our weaknesses. In community we are no longer alone, but are known and beloved, called by name, we belong. In community we encounter the living God in the human faces with whom God surrounds us as we are shaped into the living people of God.

Sometimes we forget. We wander off. We sleep in and miss coming to church, then sleep in again, then, get out of the habit. It will always be there when we need it. We get mad, somebody hurts our feelings ... we retreat into our shells like so many hermit crabs and do our own thing. Or worse, we put buildings or programs or ideas over real people. That's when we usually do damage. But God forgives us as we forgive each other. And God reminds us that the church is the people. The church is all people who gather in the name of Christ. The church is Christ loving the whole world through us. Everybody. Everybody.

Church is messy, unpredictable, all-too-human. And church is glorious, joyful, infused with the presence of God. Martin Luther King called it "the beloved community," meaning "beloved of God" of course, but also "sharing God's love with one another." I see something beautiful taking shape in you right here in Eagle River: the beloved community, the people of God, the body of Christ, the church. I hope and I pray that we never lose it. May we pray?

Forgive us, God, when we take for granted the best you have given us, the very soul of our being, the community of the Spirit. But remind us we need each other. Recall us to your service. Make us your people again today. And make us your people tomorrow, too, and we will love the people we meet with your love, we will touch them with your kindness, we will help them with your care. Strengthen us as we rejoice in you and our lives will be like our worship, one long celebration of your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.