

Beth Taylor Ordination
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
January 29, 2011
Christ Church, Cranbrook
Bonnie A. Perry

Come Holy Spirit and fill us with the fire of your love. In your Holy Name we pray.
Amen.

Please be seated.

Bishop Gibbs, Gary, Beth, all of you who have traveled from near and far--Good
Afternoon.

They have forgotten.
It happens you know.
It happens all the time.
It happens to us
and it happened to them.
More than century has gone by
more than three generations
have gone to their graves
singing foreign songs
in a foreign land.

But now they are returning from Bablyon.
They are returning
to their beloved city on a hill
to rebuild and renew.
Yet that shining place is razed and ruined.
Charred beams and weeds
fill the temple courtyard
and scavenging packs of animals
walk freely through the holes in the city's walls.

Word comes to Nehemiah,
a faithful Jew
serving the Persian King,
word comes
from his brother in Jerusalem
that they need help:
they are threatened by their enemies all around.
The city walls
need to be rebuilt

if Jerusalem is ever again
going to be a Holy City.

The Persian King,
grants his eunuch advisor
permission to leave
and bestows upon him
the title of governor of the province of Judah.

Nehemiah arrives
with supplies, plans and a vision.
The wall is rebuilt
we are told in 52 days.
But here's the thing.
The external restorations
have been accomplished.
Although but a shadow of itself
the temple is reconstructed,
the breach in the walls repaired.
But the people have forgotten
what it means to be made
in the image and likeness of God.
The people have forgotten
who they are
and whose they are.

So Nehemiah—does what he can.
Uses the gifts he has
and calls for the King of Persia
to send back Ezra the priest.
Their local priests are dispirited,
dismayed and beat down by daily life.
It happens to us all.
They are a people without a faith.

Nehemiah realizes that they need a priest.
More than that
they need the word of God.
As it was then
it is now.
Scripture. Torah. The Law.
God's holy wisdom in words is
if we read it—
if we soak in it
it will be our on-ramp to faith.
Our entrance to God's ways and God's love.

But we have to read it,
hear it,
feel it—before we can embody it.

While they await Ezra's arrival
Nehemiah commands
that a giant scaffolding
be erected by the Watergate.
A giant scaffolding
so all can see and hear.
Then when Ezra arrives
he commands all the people
to be at the Watergate at dawn.
Men and women, all, all, all.

He instructs Ezra—
to read the Law—to read God's word to the people
from dawn to dusk
all day long
in such a way
that they will understand.

Ezra—by all accounts
is not a particularly compelling man
or charismatic preacher.
He isn't amazing, or inspiring—
instead he is faithful—
nothing more, nothing less
for the word of the Lord,
God's covenant is written upon Ezra's heart.

As he mounts the platform
and unrolls the scroll,
the people stand with him,
it is probably not unlike,
not all that dissimilar
from when Jesus enters his hometown synagogue
in Nazareth, 500 years later
and unrolls the scroll and says,

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
release to the captives,
liberty to the oppressed
and sight to the blind,
to declare the year of God's favor.”

It was probably vastly similar
 for it was on that day
 at the Watergate
 that the people began
 to hear the word of God again—
 for the very first time.

It was on that day
 that the people began to remember.
 It was the day
 that the people stood
 and said, Amen.
 It was the day when the people said, “Amen.”

This then Beth is where you come in.
 [You who have God’s Holy Scripture written on your heart. We need you. Just as
 the people of old needed Ezra: needed to hear God’s word.]

Many of you are by now
 learning what a gifted person Beth is.
 An individual whom—
 after one conversation with her,
 becomes clear
 that she is genuine, caring and strong
 that she is a rooted and grounded
 faithful woman,
 with a huge heart
 and a voice like Aretha Franklin’s.

Let’s be clear:
 Beth can sing,
 Beth can preach.
 Beth cannot cook.

Truth be told—
 she can’t find a stove in a kitchen.
 I once sent her on a mission,
 asked her to bring me the top of a wok
 a Chinese wok.
 I told her where to find it
 in the kitchen.
 Fifteen minutes later she came back
 with a 9-inch shallow frying pan
 and said,
 “This is it right?”

This is what you were looking for.”

Beth is a teacher and a preacher.
And many,
many of her lines,
her Harper Lee-like beginnings and ends
have stayed with me.

But there was one sermon:
a sermon that she preached only at the 8:00 service
—even though she was scheduled
to preach it at both the 9 and 11 o’clock services.
What I remember mostly about this particular sermon
was its beige nature and vanilla texture
—sort of like instant rice on tapioca.

I remember it was a baptismal Sunday.
We had a number of little ones
we were welcoming into the faith
at the 9 and the 11.
As I walked back
to set up for the baptisms
I invited Beth to walk with me.
I asked her,
“So Beth,
when you were writing that sermon,
did anything about that sermon touch your heart?
Did any bit of it make you cry?”

She said, “Well yeah.”
“Ok good—what part?
What part of it touched your heart?”
She said, “Well I cut that part.”
“You cut the part that made you cry?”
“Well yeah—I didn’t want my feelings to get in the way.”

“Beth—what was the line that made you cry.”
“Oh”, she said her eyes tearing,
“You see I always cry at baptisms.
I cry at baptisms because
I can’t remember my own,
and I keep thinking
if I could remember my own—
then maybe I wouldn’t have so many doubts.”

Oh that’s it.

That Beth Taylor is what you are called to do.
 That is what you
 are being ordained to do this day.
 That is how you are called to be.

To be like Ezra.
 To be the one
 with God's hope and God's promise
 as a seal upon your heart
 and a mantle about your shoulders.

To speak your doubts and your faith [and make God's scripture known.]
 Beth—your doubts make you real.
 Your doubts make you whole.
 Your very presence affirming God's word
 enables us
 to remember all that we have forgotten.

To know as Isaiah said,
 "The spirit of the lord God is upon us,
 God has anointed us,
 to preach good news to the poor,
 release to the captives
 and grant liberty to the oppressed.
 God has called us to proclaim the year of God's favor.

Beth you are called
 to be our Ezra
 to stand tall and draw our attention
 beyond ourselves
 and instead to the word of God.

A word of God that we can
 (if we will)
 hear again for the very first time.
 A holy word that will give us
 the courage
 to live out the words of the prophet Isaiah.
 To live as a people loved
 and blessed completely and utterly
 for who we are
 as we are.

You Beth are being called this day,
 to help us remember
 that we are filled by the power

of the Holy Spirit
and marked as Christ's own forever.

Thanks be to God.

Let the people say,

Let the people say,

Amen.