

Reflections on Disaster Recovery **by Pastor Beth Olson**

Beth Olson and her family had water on their main floor. After the initial demolition process of ripping out drywall and insulation anywhere from 29" up to 8' in a couple of places, they're waiting for the moisture level of their main floor studs and floorboards to be low enough so they can begin rebuilding. It is an emotional rollercoaster, and water on the main floor is different from a flooded basement.

Following are a few of her thoughts as they go through the flood recovery process:

The bishop's phrase of people being "beyond weary" is exactly right. We're more fortunate than many because we can be in our home, but we who live in the chaos are the only ones that can say that. It doesn't help to hear that language from well-intentioned people who have no idea what the chaos is like. To give readers some idea, this is how we wash our dishes: we salvaged an old countertop section, propped it on our saw horses, put two tubs on it and arranged our drainer over a third tub for drying. When we're done, we dump the dirty dishwasher into a bucket, clean the washing tub with the water from the rinsing tub and then dump that water either on flowers that need water or into the aforementioned bucket which we then take outside and dump. We use another bucket for those other leftover liquids that would normally go down the drain.

And then there are the surprises that accompany rebuilding. When will they stop, I wonder, and what's going to hit us next? We had a surprise a day the week of July 6: Monday, we found out drywall had to be ripped 2' above water line, not just a clean 24" like we'd hoped. Tuesday, we learned we'll have to take off the siding and have the under-stuff examined to see if that needs to be replaced. Wednesday, we ended up having to rip out drywall to the ceiling on two walls in the dining room because mold had made it way to within 6" of the ceiling. And Thursday was a double whammy: we had to rip out the built in cabinetry of the computer room (a complete removal) and next week, they'll have to saw our living room cabinet apart at 29" to remove lower level so they can get at drywall. Part two of Thursday was the discovery of bumble bees in the wall of our computer room, complete with nest and mess. In the words of our carpenter, "I opened the wall and it was buzzing."

As for the ongoing emotional impact, I had yet another good, cathartic cry on July 8 about how overwhelming this is. Like a thunderstorm that cleanses the saturated summer atmosphere when it finally lets loose and pours, so the cry relieved a lot of the built-up emotion that I had put aside in favor of tasks. That same cry allowed me to regain some equilibrium to face the day again and gird up my loins for yet another day of living in a torn-up house and the accompanying tasks of family and supply preaching. The reality that I'd kept at bay for a stretch came crashing in and I had no choice but to finally weep and sob. I highly recommend it, even though I fought it for a long time.

This is a long-term grief--and even more than grief--though I'm still not able to name what else is going on here that makes this so taxing. The deal for this particular pastor is to realize that she is not immune to being so very human, even when my brain tries to tell me that because I am a pastor, I should be better able to cope with this. In ministry, I try to be unflappable. But it's not

so easy with this one. I welcome the ongoing prayers and the work of our church to assist so many others who are dealing with the varying degrees of destruction brought about by water.

Thanks be that we have a God who brought creation out of chaos and will do so again, but it will take a while. In the meantime, there are lots of questions to be answered, waiting to be endured and lessons that we can choose to learn. Re-reading "A Grace Disguised" by Jerry Sittser is beneficial.

The significance of the ministry of presence and accompaniment can't be overstated. People will need to tell their stories time and again. We will need the hope and endurance talked about in Romans 5. We will need to hear again and again that our theology is true, that God is working a new creation out of the chaos. We will need to be reminded of how incarnate God was and is in the faces and backs and hands of those dozens (and hundreds) of volunteers who cared for people in so many ways.

And we will need to gather around word and sacrament, over coffee and cookies, in backyards and streets and living rooms to laugh, cry, remember and one day, maybe even rejoice. One day, a long time from now, we will be able to look back and see what an incredible event we've come through, how strong we really are because of the grace of God (when all we feel is weakness) and how powerful it is to be carried when we ourselves were too overwhelmed to do much of anything but be on the receiving end of the kindness and goodness of others who helped us make it to a brighter day.