

The Festival of Shelters

by **Eduard Loring with Heather Barger**

The shrill, summoning voice of Eduard Loring is an important one among us. He is grounded in our oldest poetic memories and rooted in the bodily reality of his community of need and care. His voice and his practice remind us of how it really is with us, how it could be different among us according to God's promises, and how we may, even now, enact our best hopes and our treasured memories in concrete ways. This is a welcome and urgent statement.

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary
Decatur, Georgia

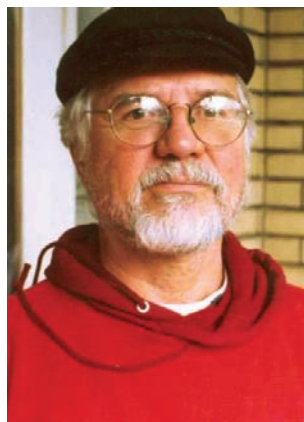
This little book describes a profound biblical memory and prophetic practice that has been reimagined by the faithful disciples at the Open Door Community over the last two decades. They advocate a recovery and recontextualization of the great Jewish Feast of Sukkoth, believing passionately (and correctly) that this public liturgy of homelessness means to remind us of God's good news to the poor. When properly relocated among the "hell" endured by actual homeless folk on the streets of our cities, this liturgy can animate liberation, compassion and social change. I am deeply indebted to the Open Door's witness both to ancient scriptural wisdom and to the contemporary terrain of justice in our nation of housing apartheid.

Ched Myers

Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries
www.bcm-net.org

In every generation or so Yahweh-Elohim raises prophets and teachers of exquisite gifts and insights. Not to listen to them is to put our lives and the church at peril. Not to perform the Word under their direction is to permit The Powers to chink the Rock upon which we are building the Beloved Community of God. Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, and Ched Myers, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, are such among us.

Eduard-the-Agitor



Eduard N. Loring

ISBN 978-0-9715893-1-5

THE FESTIVAL OF SHELTERS

BY: EDUARD N. LORING WITH HEATHER BARGERON

The Festival of Shelters A Celebration for Love and Justice



Nelia Kimbrough

Eduard N. Loring
with Heather Barger
preface by Dick Rustay

Welcome

To the Open Door Community
Atlanta, Georgia
Visit us!

In the center of the city we live on the margins of the belly of the beast. We are a ragtag community living in concert in the blood washed band. We believe that Jesus, The Human One, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. There are several roads to the Beloved Community of God; this is an excellent one.

We live together in an old apartment building with lives centered at our Welcome Table. We have learned through the Cry of the Poor that justice is important, but supper is essential. Please come and eat with us.

We have enemies: war & the death penalty; capitalism & poverty. Homelessness & mega-mansions. Homophobia, sexism, racism, the use of the gospel to justify wealth, violence, and political gain. And: our own selfish, hardened hearts of stone which we struggle to disarm. We pray to the God of love to turn our hearts to flesh.

We hear hope banging on our doors, sitting at our Welcome Table, bending at our foot clinic. The gospel is hope for peace and justice, for community and human dignity, for compassion and love-in-action. The gospel is an engagement with injustice and the struggle to bring the Beloved Community of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Come! Celebrate the Festival of Shelters. Let us join hands and walk the journey together.

Open Door Community
www.opendoorcommunity.org

Dedication

This little work written with my good friend Heather Barger is dedicated to our fellow disciples and convenental partners, Gladys and Dick Rustay. They have been our shelter from the storm and the rock upon which this faith community has built up its foundations on the way, the truth and the life of the Jewish prophet from Nazareth, Jesus our savior.

Thank you Dick and Gladys for making our Life Together a reflection of the Beloved Community on the streets, in the jails and prisons, and inside our wonderful home of 910 Ponce de Leon Ave, NE

Atlanta
Festival of Shelters
2008

With An Attitude of Gratitude: Thank You

This effort of love and hope would not have borne fruit without the encouragement and help from many friends and companions. We have been brought together by our love for the God of liberation, and our hope that poverty and prisons-as-punishment will be dashed into the sea and swallowed in a lake of fire.

First and foremost I have been blessed to work with Heather Barger. Her manifold gifts, her theology of liberation and praxis, and her keen mind and compassionate heart have shaped this work on every page.

Our homeless friends who have slept on the ground with us and protected us when the wolves and lions from the center of the city have attempted to devour our witness have been basic. They teach us the meaning of Festival as well as Shelter. Homelessness is hell. Yet, close to hell, in the belly of the domination beast, we get a glimpse and taste of the very radical and precious grace of Yahweh-Elohim.

Among those who worked and loved and helped, Heather, Dick and I say a gentle and angry: "Thank you."

Sherry Wright who shepherded the layout and told the truth. She has the keenest of artistic eyes. Michelle French danced the layout through many intricate steps. Sherry and Michelle are members of Central Presbyterian Church, a prophetic and loving church with whom we share ministry and vision.

Nelia and Calvin Kimbrough are Open Door Community partners. In 1991 I fell in love with Nelia's grasping "Adams Street Bible Study." Calvin gave me a photograph of the painting which I have kept near me ever since. In 2004 Nelia gave me the original. Please make an appointment with me and I will let you view it! Calvin is an award winning photographer who has a

gift for “Doors of the Soul.” He has a permanent exhibit at the Open Door Community. Come and Behold.

Miguel Martinez who made the digital copy of Nelia’s artwork for the book.

John Turnbull my wonderful editor and friend. John is a leader at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, an active congregation undoing racism and telling the truth.

Brian Taylor whose excellent work has made manifest most of our pages of writing past, present and future. Brian was the only Atlanta businessman to stand up to Coca Cola the soft drink (but hard business) Corporation which brought the Olympics to Atlanta in order to move the poor and African American out, so Atlanta could gentrify white. Please get your printing done at:

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Atlanta, Georgia 30313

Murphy Davis, my sweetheart, partner, and very best friend in the whole wide universe. She opened the door for me many years ago. Together with our Hannah we are Homemakers and disciples of the crucified risen Messiah.

The Open Door Community, residential and extended, on the streets, in the prisons, on Death Row for life together.

Remember in the words of Joe Beasley, Christian Hellraiser

“You can’t get to heaven
If you don’t raise a little hell.”

PREFACE

Dick Rustay

I remember the second year that the Open Door Community celebrated the Jewish Festival of Shelters. It was 1990, and we celebrated the festival in Woodruff Park, a small park located in the heart of Atlanta where many homeless people gather. They sat on park benches and grass, talking and resting. Tall buildings containing banks and numerous business offices surrounded the park. At noon many office workers from the buildings came to the park to eat their lunch purchased from street vendors. College students from Georgia State University wandered through the park changing classes. This created a mixture of people from many different walks of life. The park was a much different “wilderness” than the wilderness the Hebrew people experienced as they fled from the hard oppressive hand of Egypt. It was a modern-day, more sophisticated wilderness.

One of the intentions of the Open Door Community’s Festival of Shelters celebration was to have a 24-hour presence at Woodruff Park, a way to be in solidarity with the homeless. We held up signs reminding people that not everyone would sleep in a home with a soft bed that night. Fall was on its way and there would be thousands of homeless people suffering from the winter’s cold. I was one of several from the Open Door Community who stayed out overnight. Now, nearly 15 years later, I can still feel the bone-chilling cold which slowly worked its way from the damp ground into the deep recesses of my body. I remember even more vividly that from 4:30 a.m. on business-women and men who periodically walked up the street across from the park and entered the office buildings to get an early start for work. What shocked me was that they were walking down the street, having just gotten out of their cars, in their shirtsleeves! I realized how easy it was to spend five minutes outside in 40 degree weather without a jacket, and without a thought. It is an entirely different

The Festival of Shelters is about remembering. This Jewish festival is celebrated after the completion of the harvest as a reminder to the Jews that they were once homeless, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and it was *YHWH* who sustained them by providing food, water, and protection.

experience to spend 5-8 hours outside without shelter or a coat. Our bodies bring a deep kind of memory, much more penetrating and long-lasting than remembering with our minds alone.

The Festival of Shelters is most of all about remembering. This Jewish festival is also known as *Sukkoth*, the Hebrew word for “shelter.” Once people have houses and plenty of food, it is too easy to forget that we still need God’s sustaining power for life. The festival is a practice that teaches us not to forget our sister or brother in need because we are all in need. This practice is necessary because, with houses comes forgetting. In temporary shelters, we are nudged to remember our fragility and our dependence on God first and foremost. We must remember to rely on *YHWH* for strength, sustenance and life itself.

The festival is a practice that teaches us not to forget our sister or brother in need because we are all in need. This practice is necessary because, with houses comes forgetting. In temporary shelters, we are nudged to remember our fragility and our dependence on God first and foremost. We must remember to rely on *YHWH* for strength, sustenance and life itself.

One of the reasons that the Open Door Community has chosen to make this celebration an integral part of our liturgical life is that it lacks the cultural and economic stranglehold that surrounds our traditional church celebrations. Christmas has more to do with Santa Claus and what he may bring us than the significance of God breaking into this world to proclaim a new way of life. Easter has more to do with what the Easter Bunny may bring us than the power of the resurrection for our lives. Because the Festival of Shelters has not been part of the traditional Christian liturgy, the god of commercialism does not determine the focus of the festival. We are free to develop our celebration in a way that has *YHWH*, the God of Liberation, at the forefront and God’s intention of abundant life for all people as a central theme. We are free to remember we belong first to God. We are free to remember that our God seeks mercy, compassion and justice for all peoples first. Profit, self indulgence and acquiring ‘things’ are not God’s priorities for our lives. God promises abundant life but on God’s terms, not ours. God calls us to take steps into the wilderness without certainty as to where our feet will land, trusting that God will guide and protect us.

In his theological handbook of Old Testament themes, *Reverberations of Faith*, Walter Brueggmann describes ancient Hebrew festivals as having three aspects:

1. There is a tension, Brueggmann notes, between the culture surrounding the festival and God's demands for how God's people respond to that culture.

American culture wants to sweep homelessness under the rug and out of sight. The City of Atlanta has "Quality of Life" ordinances that make homelessness illegal. It has created certain "Tourist Triangles" in downtown Atlanta in which panhandling is prohibited, thus effectively pushing the homeless out. Out of sight, out of mind! Meanwhile, the city makes no concentrated effort to house the homeless. Atlanta believes that if only the homeless would get a job they could get off the streets and into housing. It refuses to acknowledge that minimum wage jobs are almost always part-time. Even if a worker does work full-time the minimum wage is less than half of the \$11.00 an hour needed to sustain a person in Atlanta. During the Festival of Shelters, we proclaim the prayers from the Jewish Prayer Book reminding us that "*we too are commanded that the rich must give to the poor, the strong help the weak, and all live together in peace.*"

2. The festival requires one to live and act in a way that interrupts one's normal routine.

We at the Open Door dramatically change our "normal routine" by serving our meals in front of City Hall or at Woodruff Park, worshipping in public space, and spending days and nights on the streets with our homeless friends. We enter public space and we contest that space on behalf of the poor. We put our bodies in a different place. We remember the Hebrews on their journey in the wilderness and their dependence on God for life. We too are in need of learning to live a life that includes space for "the least of these." We remember that the Hebrew Exodus story is our story as well, and God continues to provide enough for all of God's people.

During the Festival of Shelters, we proclaim the prayers from the Jewish Prayer Book reminding us that "*we too are commanded that the rich must give to the poor, the strong help the weak, and all live together in peace.*"

“...Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream. Then with joy shall we draw water from the wells of our salvation.” (*The Jewish Prayer Book*)

3. The last aspect of a Hebrew festival is the need for a public declaration that dramatically proclaims the Hebrews’ identity as the people of YHWH and YHWH’s identity as the God of the Hebrews. The Book of Nehemiah refers to the Festival of Shelters and declares, “Build shelters on the flat roofs, in yards in the Temple courtyard, and *in the public squares*.” (Nehemiah 8:15).

We at the Open Door practice this public proclamation in contested spaces in downtown Atlanta crying out, “Remember, we are God’s people and we are called to declare God’s justice and mercy!” And we do it joyously, because joy in God undergirds all of our actions. Joy sustains us when we frantically cook and serve hungry friends, making sure there is enough for everyone. Joy sustains us in our tiredness. Sometimes others passing by think we have gone mad or are simply troublemakers. But we continue to rejoice in the assurance of God’s call to us. We rely on ancient prayers that remind us, “we have learned: not charity, but justice is demanded of us. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream. Then with joy shall we draw water from the wells of our salvation.” (*The Jewish Prayer Book*)

So as you read this history of the Open Door Community’s exploration of the Festival of Shelters we invite you to discover it with your bodies as well as your minds. We invite you to celebrate the Festival in an extraordinary way that pulls you away from your normal routine into living your life as a public declaration of your faith, a faith that remembers that having homes and enough to eat is not sufficient when there are brothers and sisters who do not have homes or enough to eat. It is not sufficient until justice rolls down the streets of your city and righteousness becomes the water that sustains both you and your neighbor.

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Festival of Shelters: A Celebration of Love and Justice

By Eduard N. Loring

The Festival of Shelters came to us from the streets of downtown Atlanta where homeless and hungry men and women, girls and boys live and cry, beg and die. The streets are our gift and our burden, here Jesus is served, made manifest and killed over and over again. The streets are his empty tomb. The streets are the location of the mystical, political, final rendering of his resurrection power, which is available to all who would but come and spend a portion of their lives for the outcasts.

We are invited into the streets by our homeless mothers and brothers, failed lawyers, immigrants, school teachers, Katrina's orphans washed upon the streets of Atlanta along the gutters of Southern Cities on the make, jobless earnest young men, prostitutes, felons, believers, hustlers, poets and artists of skill if not renown. We walk upon the streets and listen to the cry of the poor for help and housing. From our anguish, our hearts are made new again and again by Eucharist and foot-washing. By the power of love and hope on the margins, in our street presence, we are given the Festival of Shelters year after year till Shalom and Sabbath and the Beloved Community of God come onto the streets as they are in heaven. Till all God's children have shoes and closets to put them in! (Housing precedes closets.)

Most of the world does not know of the Festival of Shelters. Our Jewish sisters and brothers know. In our neighborhood on Ponce de Leon Avenue, the Jewish Community celebrates Sukkoth every year. Unfortunately, in their backyard. The Festival of Shelters is a new name for an ancient Jewish Harvest Festival: Sukkoth, Festival of Booths or Tabernacles.

The name is as new as the translation of the Bible by the American Bible Society in 1976: The Good News Bible. Little did I know in 1977 when we at Clifton Presbyterian Church adopted this translation as our own that the Good News Bible would be a gift that fed my

vision and practice for what appears to be the rest of my life. Thank you! You old and ancient writers of the Holy Scriptures. Thank you! You new and faithful translators of the Bible who are not afraid to “make it plain.”

The astute Biblical Scholars of the American Bible Society dropped much of the archaic language that has no experiential base or recognition in the church and culture of America and used words based in daily life. (A most helpful example to folk who read the Bible prophetically/politically as we at the Open Door Community do: the change from princes to rulers.)

When Murphy, Hannah and I came to the Open Door Community in 1981 Murphy, and I had copies, already tattered, of the Good News Bible in our backpacks. From our years at the wonderful little church, Clifton Presbyterian, we also brought three precious disciplines that the congregation practiced so deeply that they gave birth to the Open Door Community.

The first gift is Bible Study. All that we have done and become since 1975 has been rooted in the study of scriptures among a diverse group of hungry disciples, who come together in promise-making to discern and practice the Word of God.

The second discipline is prayer. We discovered when we do not find prayer a necessity, we are too far from the truth, God, and the poor. If we practice the Word of God, we must pray: sometimes in joy and thanksgiving, other times in pain, fear, even unbelief, tears, laughter, silence, and solitude. Another of our mentors has written that prayer is the most radical act for modern women and men. Jacques Ellul speaks truth.

The third discipline is living in solidarity with the poor. This discipline came with bone-bare work and heartache. Our little church of forty-five folk found this gift wrapped in a box of stone and sealed with barbed wire: live in solidarity with the poor. In what you do, say, spend, eat, read, watch, sing, play, drink, hope, study, ride, dress, fight, vote, worship, own, and love, make a

preferential option for the poor. Or to use the words of Jesus as he quotes from his favorite prophet Isaiah in his Nazareth Manifesto:

The Sovereign Lord has filled me with her
Spirit.

She has chosen me and sent me
To bring good news to the poor,
To heal the broken-hearted,
To announce release to captives
And freedom to those in prison.

Yahweh-Elohim has sent me to proclaim
That the time has come
When the God of the Homeless will save her
people

And defeat their enemies.

God has sent me to comfort all who mourn,

To give to those who mourn in Zion

Joy and gladness instead of grief,

A song of praise instead of sorrow.

They will be like trees

That our Creator has planted.

They will all do what is right,

And God will be praised for what she has done.

They will rebuild the streets that have long been
in ruins.

*(Isaiah 61:1-4, Good News Bible, adapted by the
Open Door Community)*

In the Beginning...

Six of us were sitting there, on the floor, in Rob and Carolyn Johnson's living room. We had read an article from *Sojourners* magazine; we made a circle holding hands and began to pray. What we heard that night was simple and clear, concrete and windy, strong and frightening: Serve the poor.

On November 1, 1979, the doors to our tiny church opened for thirty men to sleep on the sanctuary floor after a good supper and shower. In the morning, cheese grits, all we could eat, were the order of the day, with coffee, coffee, coffee, flowing from the big insulated pitchers to thirty-five cups. The "hosts" spent the night in the church with the thirty "guests." Often, Murphy and I with Hannah, our little bundle of joy in her perambulator, would sleep in the back while the men coughed, hacked, walked, moaned, slept throughout the night.

"Something there is that doesn't like a wall," according to Robert Frost, Jesus, and Paul. In fact, from Ched Myers: "Paul staked his ministry on overcoming the institutional segregation between Jewish and Gentile Christians." Ironically, if not paradoxically, segregation—walls among people—is the one point upon which Christianity stands or falls. If there are walls, then what we are seeing, reading about, or hearing is baloney and not the Christian faith. Baloney is very bad for your health. Therefore, as the gospel grew in our hearts and performances, some of us knew we had to live with the homeless. Solidarity and a preferential option have to do, for us, with location: where we live, and with whom we live, as a response to why we live.

In December 1981, a very few of us from the church moved to Ponce de Leon Avenue into an old apartment building. For in addition to Jesus, Paul, and Robert Frost we had been reading and re-reading the works of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* newspaper from Mary House in New York City. We visited Mary House. The folk there helped us get started on the radical and

new path toward a House of Hospitality, a shared life of discipleship, the Works of Mercy, and the Journey for Justice. We changed our way of life. We became, thanks be to God, a Protestant Catholic Worker House.

Housing is a problem. Always. More than a million and a half Americans, two-thirds of whom are baptized, have no house, no place at all. Housing separates, comforts, and secures. Houses have walls and closed doors even if your name is The Open Door!

Housing is like a bed. Seductive to the suffering of the world where sisters and brothers hunger, starve, die, dance, sing, and make love in the streets. So, soon, very soon indeed, after the fire by night and the cloud by day that got us to Ponce de Leon Avenue we heard the cry, sometimes angry, sometimes gentle, with mother-love: "Come to the streets! Get out here! See what it is like. Let the police push you around and take you to jail like us, with us. Come sit in the labor pools with us and watch us beg for work as you call us lazy bums."

We went and we go. God said, "Go from home comfort to the streets I will show you, and the poor and homeless will bless you." We went and we go. Often I hear, as I walk from our apartment to the streets, a manifesto to the housed who have lost their way inside their walls. In the voice of the streetless, T. S. Eliot writes:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread
Out against the sky
Like a patient etherized
Upon a table;
Let us go, through certain
Half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night
Cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants
With oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a

Tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an over-whelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.
(*"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"*)

The streets are holy places. Here we smell the wounds of the crucified Christ and see him in disgusting guises as he meets us in his rage, illness, dementia, hope. Jesus meets us suffering on the cross and at the traffic light. When red we stop, look, and listen: Then this Jew meets us in his resurrection power. The streets are transformative, like jail and prison, like your lover at Grady Hospital in the emergency room waiting, waiting, waiting for the Second Coming as the poor slouch not toward Bethlehem but Woodruff Park. The streets are our past in Babylon and our future in the Beloved Community of God. The streets are our cost of discipleship and the price is very steep, but the product is of the highest quality. The streets drive us to prayer, make us hungry for a hunk of bread with Jesus embedded in it. The streets make us thirsty for a swig of grape juice—most of us at the Open Door Community are alcoholics, including me.

The fire power of our non-violent God who suffers tragically, almost without necessity for there is no food or housing shortage in our country, burns us with her grace and love. She demands that we break down what is filthy and rotten in our system which causes poverty, or we will become "like a devil's sick of sin." (Wilfred Owens)

The streets are the locations of the presence of God. Christian freedom is vocation: a fair trade for the chains to the domination system. And vocation; the free gift of necessity. What we must do. That given. That accepted. That put into practice with stick-to-itiveness, and we are redeemed. We are free.

But beware. It excites and titillates the Evil One to find a free person. Paul, who, like Jesus, spent his ministry on the streets, challenges free folk: "Freedom

is what we have—Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again” (Galatians 5:1, GNB). On the streets and free! This is it. This will stop wars and bring to fruitfulness Jesus’ revolution of values as clarified by Dorothy Day and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We went. We go, because we have to. We go to the streets in Christian freedom, which is our necessity. Here we go. We can do no other!

In the beginning, we went and we go to spend time, to accompany, to visit, on the streets with our friends. Then, in the early 1980s, we began to spend Holy Week and Easter on the streets. With daily worship at a “seeing site and listening post” (e.g., the jail, the public hospital, the city shelter) a group each night spends twenty-four hours walking and talking with the homeless, eating in soup kitchens around town, and engaging Jesus, The Human One, at traffic lights when the light is red. We continue to practice Holy Week and Easter in this way. Please join us next time ’round.

Our third step was rallies at Woodruff Park each fall to call attention to the coming winter. Homelessness is hell. Always. Every day. Every night. However, in the winter, with the darkening of days, the weather often mean, homelessness is even more hellish. Despair. Wet and can’t get dry. Frostbite always nibbling and taking a big bite every once in a while: a toe here, the end of a finger there. On a particularly evil night a baby dead and an old woman frozen. We held rallies to beg like dirty old panhandlers, for the churches, for the city, for the business community, for individuals with an extra room in their homes to open a door to the homeless poor. The cry was heard in many places!

In 1978, there were no free shelters for the homeless and only two that charged a fee. In 2007, the metropolitan area of Atlanta has at least thirty-seven, and others, unlisted, are underground to keep the neighbors and police from driving more victims back to the streets at night.

In the meantime we are living life inside our house, hard and often harsh, beautiful among broken and torn lives, sober in the midst of drugs and alcohol. Learning by grace and by reflection upon our sin and brokenness. Dorothy Day, informed by Dostoevsky, is right: “Love in action is harsh and dreadful when compared to love in dreams.” The streets were calling us back and back again. Holy Week and Easter had become a shaping and reshaping experience of our lives, and, frankly, we wanted more. Then one night as we were in our proverbial circle studying the Scriptures, there it was! Right in front of us. The story had been there for 2,500 years or at least for ten years, since the publishing of the Good News Bible: The Festival of Shelters.

Yahweh-Elohim-in-action gave it to us. We were excited beyond measure. I couldn’t believe it at first. A festival for us and for these times! Wow! Thank you, Jesus! And so we began to re-vision our lives in the fall with the streets, with the homeless, with our larger community, with the powers and principalities of our city which condone, blame, cause, and further homelessness and the criminalization of the poor and poverty in our affluent dying world.

Why the Festival of Shelters?

Biblical Israel celebrates three principal festivals.

(1) The Passover: a remembrance and embracing of Yahweh-Elohim, the God of the Hebrew slaves, who will even harden the heart of the leader of Empire to free the shackles and remake the lives of the poor and oppressed. Passover has been transformed in Christianity as the Eucharist. Jesus took the cup and bread and gave a new interpretation, a new covenant, rooted in non-violence and open to Gentiles for the incarnating of a movement based upon his way, truth, and life.

(2) The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost: celebrates the spring harvest. The Feast was named after Alexander the Great taught Greek to the subjects of his empire. Pentecost means “fifty” and begins fifty days after

Passover begins. As creation and liberation are a unity in Hebrew thought and life, this harvest feast is linked to the memory of Yahweh-Elohim making a covenant with the former slaves for the sake of blessings for the world. At the center of the covenant is Torah, the law. Torah is the way to structure life with God and neighbor for love, mercy, and justice on behalf of all nations. As creation and liberation/redemption are one in the Hebrew Scriptures, so is memory and hope, which in turn is the basis for worship and daily life. Pentecost, like Passover, was reimagined in Christian experience and liturgy. Pentecost is the festival of the coming of the Holy Spirit among believers and the birthday of the Church on earth for the sake of the world.

(3) And Sukkoth: the fall harvest festival. There are different names for this festival in various translations of the Hebrew Scriptures: The Festival of Booths or the Festival of Tabernacles. And the more recent translation: Festival of Shelters.

Christianity also has three core festivals. Advent and Christmas, Holy Week and Easter, and Pentecost. Although Passover and Pentecost made it into Christian festivals, Sukkoth/Festival of Shelters did not. Why not? I can think of twenty-eight reasons, but I only want to lift up two for our consideration.

First, the Festival of Shelters is risky, uncomfortable, and breaks down dividing walls among race, class, gender, and, sexual orientations. Cornel West in *Race Matters* convinces me that comfort is a necessity to which Americans, of color and of no color, give themselves. The central middle-class vision of the good life is comfort in our comfort zone. Second, the Festival of Shelters takes courage and commitment to perform. However, the gifts and fruits from worshipping with this God-prescribed liturgy are joy and life abundant.

The gospel was born on the streets

Jesus was a street preacher. Although the faith *of* Jesus and the faith *in* Jesus was preached and performed on the streets by the Apostles, Paul, and disciples throughout the ages, worship has come to be understood, erroneously, to be an inside activity. The word “sanctuary” has come to mean walled off from the streets. Some churches even hire security guards and off-duty police with guns to protect the sanctuary and the worshipers from the streets and the gifts of gospel from the streets: truth, revelation, love, and rage from lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, soldiers, street artists, politicians who lost their races, beggars, bankers, bleeding women, widows with mites, children, the crazies, drug addicts and dealers with no cell phone, Black men in baggie pants, poor whites from dead farms and Appalachian chicken farmers who lost their chicks to Goldkist, quite a variety, a diversity, a world, the streets for which Jesus, Paul, Gandhi, Malcolm X, Jon Daniels, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Viola Liuzzo died.

As the door to hearts and homes and sanctuaries continue to close, we crucify them all. We are afraid. Our nation has become a security state. Our churches have become security churches. Therefore, one could argue, getting folk involved in a Christian rendition of Sukkoth/Festival of Shelters ain't easy. Nor was it meant to be! God be praised. And that's not all.

For people of the faith *of* Jesus—that is, his teachings and deeds as the basis for discipleship—Christmas and Easter have become “full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.” (Shakespeare) Or not much at any rate. The traditional Christian festivals have been devoured and emptied of biblical content by American culture. Many of our Christian leaders are a part of our maniacal way of life. They lack the guts to tell the truth about what the festivals actually signify vis-à-vis this damned dying domination system of war and homelessness and the death penalty. Dorothy Day's diagnosis put the injustice in the middle of our laps:

“Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy rotten system.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., saw the coming spiritual death of the United States of America seeping like sewage throughout the land. Said King on the streets: “We must have a revolution of values or perish as a people.”

This is the historical cultural context of the call to the Festival of Shelters. The root cause of this heresy, this monstrosity of war-making religion, is the lack of call and practice for justice which is required on practically every page of the Bible.

There is a most important caveat however! Lovemaking and Eros. Yahwayh-Elohim, our mother creator and redeemer, put the “Song of Songs” right in the middle of the Bible. Justice is important but rocking and rolling is the will of God too! Like dancing, having a glass of wine, and eating high on the hog from time to time. When in the love huddle at the midnight hour with one’s beloved, about which the “song of songs” sings and dreams, who is thinking about politics or festivals? As one of our most gifted poets fancies:

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here’s a traveled man that knows what he talks
about,
And there’s a politician
That has both read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war’s alarms,
But O that I was young again
And held her in my arms
(*William Butler Yeats, “Politics”*)

Martyred by hanging naked from gallows quickly built by Hitler’s rage, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is wont to have said, “One need not think of the Transcendent One while in the arms of their lover.” From the Song of Songs let us go now you and I back to the gospel and justice works.

We must admit it. We must resist it: the American Way of Life has absorbed and domesticated the particularity of the Christian witness. Is there a Christian way of life in the United States? No! Jesus is not so much crucified in the marketplace as he is simply sold. One more consumer item is he among the latest self-help or healing fads. Behaviorally it is hard to see the difference between a Christian and any other citizen. There are two exceptions: Christians support the death penalty and war at a higher percentage of approval than the general population.

A Midrash

1950: I am riding in a brand-new Ford. I never had before, and at ten that is a mighty big deal. My great-aunt Zoe and I are going to Athens, Georgia, from Pickens, South Carolina, to move Zoe's sister, May Zeigler, to the family place in Orangeburg, South Carolina.

May had just retired after twenty-plus years on the faculty at the University of Georgia. Two lanes, hot as hell already in June, 50mph felt like flying and Zoe teaching me to be good all along the way. Other than her love for Hank Williams she was an upstanding First Baptist Church Sunday School teacher. ("The gospel in a nutshell is John 3.16," she had me repeat as a part of her self-made catechism, the Baptists not having one.) Then she taught me a line that has been with me ever since that hot day as we rolled south across the ruined cotton fields and the Negro shanties with children my age hauling water and gawking at me for many had never been inside a car like this one: "You must show that Christ can save by the way that you behave."

Zoe, bless her heart, a hard-core fundamentalist whose humanity bulged out like a wen on her throat when she sang "Your Cheating Heart" and Hank dead drunk in the backseat of a Cadillac, lost, hound dog hollering, behind a slanting moonshine juke joint. Zoe,

whose name in Greek means life, taught me a motto about “visible Christianity” which entered my heart. I did not know what she meant (outside of Southern moralism: don’t touch it, don’t dance with it, don’t drink it, don’t smoke it, don’t play with it) until I got to sit on the hard wooden stools in the death-row visiting area; or I waited at 5:30 a.m. in a labor pool watching one hundred Black men fight for work at less than minimum wage. They, already exhausted, hungry, bleak, knew that the day held stoop labor or jail. And, hey, no seat on the toilet, no paper beside it, no hot water in the lavatory, just to your left where your knee slides along the wet, rusty, slimy pipe.

Thank you, Zoe. And she, Aunt Zoe, believed God made the Black people inferior and for the will of the white bosses. And she died believing that the gospel was the basis for segregation and white superiority and that the poor got what they deserved. But she did give me a vision by which to live my life thirty years after we had gotten Aunt May settled into her home in Orangeburg: “You must show that Christ can save by the way that you behave.”

Dangers of Domestication

Let me give a couple of examples, well-worn and obvious, but very important. It is precisely in our public festivals that we make definitive witness to our faith. We attempt to shape the systemic forces of national life toward the biblical values of shalom and justice.

We Christians used to wage a cultural battle with the takeover by corporations and capitalism, saying, “Put Christ back into Christmas”, and “Jesus is the reason for the Season.” The Christmas story is actually very simple, but it is daunting: a new way to read history, a new conception of Yahweh-Elohim, anti-war, non-violence, and above all peace among all people. Christmas is a festival of hope banging on the back door of an inn in which there is no room for God. All this in the midst of political murder which is bloody for kids. At least in

Luke, Christmas is for all people, Jew and Gentile, which begins the anti-segregation message of the gospel whose purpose is to break down dividing walls.

For us who believe this outrageous story, God becomes a baby. The Christmas story is among the most illuminating, clarifying, and demanding festivals in religious literature and points to that unique fact of the Christian Religion: only Christianity among the world's major faiths was founded by a martyr, who was a political threat to the religious elite and the builders of empire. There is here, and here is there—and that's why the streets are the location of the faith.

The Christmas story was told two thousand years ago. The truth was smushed to the ground in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine transmogrified Jesus into the Roman war god setting the birthday celebration of Jesus the Jew at December 25. This date linked Jesus to Mithras, the Persian sun god, to embed the peace-making prophet and slain founder of faith in the religion of a war god.

In America we worship Jesus as a war god, but we are not able to admit it. Capitalism does need Jesus as a war god and as a salesman. The way to get at the problem was to birth another to go alongside and overshadow Jesus the homeless infant. And so we gave birth to Santa Claus.

Santa Claus is a wise old death-demon who combines an attribute or two of Yahweh-Elohim and Herod. He is a central god in the American pantheon. As America grows and matures into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, Santa Claus takes on a more important role of bringing unity in the midst of the diversity of our sagging culture. Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindu, Shinto, housed, homeless, death-row prisoners, and executioners can all participate in the orgy of Christmas, feting or not feting Santa Claus as our hearts of stone desire. No rub there, and we can do it under the American flag and the Confederate flag. Jesus and Santa Claus do not offend.

We have known this friendly old white male God,

often sipping Coca-Cola and sometimes kissing mom under the Christmas tree, as judge. Used to be that his omniscience was basic to the season: he knows if you have been naughty or nice. Like the Deuteronomist theology of blessings and curses, or Calvinism's proof of election, or the prosperity gospel of the American economy today, nice behavior was rewarded with free gifts (like those for the baby Jesus by the Magi from the East).

A problem emerged in the U.S. economy and in American culture at the rise of the Cold War about 1948. We were shifting from a producing economy to a consumer economy. A manufacturing economy requires discipline, savings, delayed gratification, and a modest vision of food, drink, vacations, mountain/beach homes, boats, cars, clothes, wives and husbands who work instead of sitting on the trophy shelf, and several children. A consumer society requires not citizens, but customers. (Hence the abandonment of the poor.) As George W. Bush told us after the 9/11 attack: buy, buy, buy and show the terrorist that our free and democratic way of life has not been altered by their terror and the loss of 3,500 lives. Go shopping! Even the moniker for the poorest of the poor who are diseased at our public hospitals is "consumer."

So Santa, like the rest of us, has had to change. And with Santa went Jesus the Crucified Messiah as an infant and his birthday party.

By 1980 the powers of the Evil One had changed the street prophet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. into a harmless American Idol selling bumper stickers, T-shirts, and trash baskets. (No joke.) No vision, no discipline, no cost, only comfort and ease. King's Dream became a dream that even the Republican Party could disingenuously appropriate to their agenda of undoing the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Some say God, Santa, and King are dead. But I wonder if it is not the United States of America that has died?

There is in the Christian churches almost no cost of discipleship. And where there is discipleship, you can

charge it. "Buy now, pay later." "We all change with the times. Business is business, and business is always ahead of the law and morals," as Willie Stark tells Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*.

Santa Claus, Jesus, and even Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., like all our gods and goddesses, have changing cultural and religious functions. If our way of life is to be continued, we must be cajoled, forced, threatened, persuaded, and/or seduced to consume, to feed greed, to work hard and to play harder. After all, life is short. We must for the sake of the nation buy what we want and do not need. Santa, Jesus, and King are consumer advocates. They advocate: Buy now. Christmas has become the most important economic season of the year. Christmas is to the business community what war is to the weapons industry. Without it we go broke. The biblical agonies of birth, rebirth, peace on earth, and deadly political assault do not inform the society. Visit a church where the pulpit sits beside the towering Christmas tree just to the left of the American flag.

As I often say when no one is listening: diddledamn! I love Jesus Christ. I love the gospel story, which is my story too. I love you, and I love the homeless poor and the prisoner. Well, a lot of them anyhow. I am not primarily a citizen of the United States of America. I belong to the church, and I am on my way to the Promised Land, which is the Beloved Community of God. I am not a supporter of capitalism and greed, war or privilege, competition and professional sports, or racism or the private automobile without free public transportation for all. I do not even believe that medical care is a commodity. Nor housing. Neither does the community in which I am living and dying. We want out. We want in.

And so, we went to the margins. We live with disposable people. We believe as much in the faith *of* Jesus (his life and teachings) as we do *in* Jesus (he is the son of God, the Jewish messiah, our Way, our Truth, our Life).

So, lo and behold, we were just sitting around, drinking coffee, praying fervently, studying the Bible. And Ralph Dukes who had gone out on the porch to tell a homeless couple that we were closed for the night and, besides, there was no room and she was pregnant. Ralph gave the couple bus tokens to get to Grady Hospital because her water had broken and the battery had gone dead in the jalopy they were driving. Ralph came wobbling back into the dining room shouting, as Nelia was pausing in one of her poignant prayers, "Come out to the street! Come out to the street!"

The homeless on our side of Ponce de Leon were looking up and pointing, as were the folk eating pizza at Fellini's across the street. As I said, lo and behold: "Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared..., singing praises to God: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth . . .'" (Luke 2:14), and the Holy Spirit gave us the Festival of Shelters.

The Hunger and Thirst for Justice

Our faith and the lives of our leaders have been domesticated, sold to the American public as advertising agents. To counter the loss of distinctive biblical content from the formative Christian narratives, we need experiential and experimental public worship. Preaching and teaching have their place, but Protestantism talks too much without acting the gospel truths, and Catholicism goes to Mass too often without performing the Eucharist in the streets. Worshipfully, we need to proclaim and act out the peace and justice of the Christian faith like a city set on a hill for all the oppressors and masters of war to see and hear.

The kind of worship I want is this: remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.

Then my favor will shine on you like the morning sun, and your wounds will be quickly healed. I will always be with you to save you; my presence will protect you on every side. When you pray, I will answer you. When you call to me, I will respond.

If you put an end to oppression, to every gesture of contempt, and to every evil word; if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon. And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things. I will keep you strong and well. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water, like a spring of water that never runs dry. Your people will rebuild what has long been in ruins, building again on the old foundations. You will be known as the people who rebuilt the walls, who restored the ruined houses.

(Isaiah 58:6-12, adapted by the Open Door Community)

Or, at another time, in another place, with another prophet, Micah, the same point was made with this simple statement:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
(*Micah 6:8 NRSV*)

There is a hunger and thirst among those of us engaged in welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, crossing the line at School of the Americas, beating and bending the nose cones of the Death Machine's missiles, fighting the death penalty, recruiting students for peace on high school campuses, and pouring our blood on the state capitols of death-penalty states. There is a hunger and thirst for a way to

understand oppression and to link our lives with the sufferings and journeys of the poor and marginalized. We must present our bodies to the streets in worshipful memory and loving resistance, like God's Christmas gift to us.

We are wearied by silver-tongued sermons and words, words, words. Hungry, too, are we for an experience, in the center of this greedy, affluent, overfed, and housing-heavy society, for a Bible promise that links the poor and those with enough in solidarity. Or, as this hunger and thirst relates concretely to us at the Open Door Community, we were given a festival, unadulterated or domesticated by the domination system and domesticated death, which led us onto the turf of the homeless.

The Christian appropriation of this Jewish festival teaches us about the pain and suffering of God and about those who have nowhere to go (except jail). Through Bible Study, prayer, life together, the Works of Mercy, and the Journey for Justice, the Spirit of God gifted us with a price to pay: The Festival of Shelters. Over the years we have resurrected an Old Testament/ Hebrew Scriptures festival to make a public and specifically biblical witness in the heart of our city. Our prayer is that you will too.

What Is the Festival of Shelters? A Thanksgiving/Harvest Festival

The Festival of Shelters is a thanksgiving celebration yet radically different from our American Thanksgiving of turkey orgy and big-league football. The origins of this harvest festival reach back, likely, into the fertility cults of the Canaanites. Remnants of these cults were taken over and re-visioned by God's people during and after the conquest of Canaan.

A harvest festival is an extended doxology. People gather in the community to praise God, to share the gifts of the earth, to plan for the distribution of grain, oil, and other foodstuffs. Although the hard and rocky soil of Palestine did not flow with literal milk and honey, often cups overflowed. There was, in most years, but far from all, more than enough for everyone! Therefore, in our months of September or October the Hebrews of old and the Jews of today come together to say "Thank you" to Yahweh-Elohim our Creator and Liberator for the bounty of the harvest and the wine from the vineyard.

Behind the harvest and implicit in the doxological "Thank You" lies a confession of faith. Yahweh-Elohim is Creator of the earth, planting, and harvest. We, in turn, are created as stewards of the earth: Earth care is a core vocation of every single human being created in the image of God (and every one of us is). "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." She pronounced them good. Then, tired from six days of birthing labor, God rested. But not alone. Yahweh-Elohim commanded rest for the worker and rest for the earth. From the beginning of biblical and ethical reflection in the family of faith, we have had the resources for a life centered in Earth Care, and Neighbor Care—expressed most deeply in love of the enemy—and God Care, manifesting our love in worship and performing the Festival of Shelters.

Three points are important for our understanding of the Festival of Shelters as a response to our Creator and to the bountifulness of harvest.

1. Goodness

The land, rain, seed, the sun by day, the moon by night, plants, toil of the farmers and herders, yes, the struggle against weeds and tares, and finding the lost sheep, all is planted in and harvested with goodness. God blesses all of the means of production and all of the harvest. All is good. Time to wine and dine. Time to celebrate and dance. Time to worship, rest, and praise. Time to pig out.

The foundation of the Festival of Shelters calls attention to the damning truth of North American society: There is no housing shortage. (In July 2007, there were 102,731 houses for sale in the Atlanta metro area and new starts every day.) There is no food shortage (why is there hunger in the land?). There is no shortage of good work to do, but the minimum wage is not a living wage. (Is there any higher calling than child care?) There is space aplenty for us, even those who do our stoop labor and put the harvest on our tables and cannot now go to schools in many states. The earth suffers, is even dying, under the fossil-fuel modes of energy that keep the domination system of death turning, churning, bellowing, killing, and laughing at us. But despite our poverty of political will and passionlessness for Earth Care, the earth, the sky, and sea are created good. God says so. There is plenty for all! No need for war or the death penalty. No need for wealth or poverty. No need for hate or segregation. No need for torture and for forty-eight million folk to have so little access to medical care.

The Festival of Shelters teaches us the truth against the lies, the hope against despair, and the way against the wandering. Life is good and Creation is good. Let's hit the streets and have a party.

2. Justice

Second, the biblical truth, the amendment to the heresy of Christianity in the United States, comes directly from the character of Yahweh-Elohim. Harvest time, thanksgiving, and worship festivals are always and forever related to justice. God's intentions for goodness of the good creation (and this means you and me, too) are perverted and often go awry. For creation to be good and for the human family to live justly, we must have:

1. Biblically informed hearts of love and compassion for the earth and neighbor.
2. Biblically informed minds with hard-nosed political analysis unmasking and naming empire, domination, and oppression. The base is economics. The goal is a just distribution of resources that declares: No one has too much. No one has too little. God intends a good life for all.
3. The willingness to fight like hell for justice and peace. The cost is high but the price is right. The cost to John the Baptist: his head. Jesus Christ: a cross. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: a bullet. Mike Casey: six months in federal prison. Jon Sobrino: his voice. Dorothy Day: her lover and the father of her daughter.
4. Just laws with the resources and power to enforce them.

Biblical living and scriptural economics are opposed to the maximizing of profits and opposed to stockholders as well. Our ancestors' wisdom teaches us of the paradoxical relationship between harvest and hunger. When reaping time arrives, especially when the harvest is bountiful, greed grabs us in our guts. The laws of the harvest must be that we share food with everyone with a preferential option for the poor and hungry. People of abundance share. People of surplus horde. People of surplus are oft times rich, build walls and gates, and have tinted windows in the cars. Surplus is what I control

after I pay all my debts. Abundance creates goodness and sharing. Surplus is deadly and rots in the closet and storage houses.

The Hebrew scriptures began to structure the justice of the harvest with gleaning laws (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:21; Ruth 2). The harvesters must leave grain and fruit in the field for the gatherers. Preventing maximization and limiting efficiency are steps toward justice and recognition of the rights and plights of the poor. The piss-poor treatment of workers really makes Yahweh-Elohim angry. From time to time she sends plagues on the land to give us a piece of her mind. Consider the relationship between pesticides and cancer. Want God to smile on you? Go organic.

A necessary relationship in the Festival of Shelters is the understanding and practice that the celebration of harvest and the structures of justice—laws, legal systems, along with the right to sue corporations—go hand in hand. Without concern for sharing the fruit and grain of the harvest, we do not offer our thanksgiving and worship to Yahweh-Elohim, but to ourselves, to our nation, or to our superior technology and science. Without structures for justice, our doxology is dead. We are idolaters.

We hear echoes and see shadows of this Thanksgiving-Justice relationship when folk and congregations take food baskets to the poor. This is helpful and loving; the hungry need a lot more of it! Thanksgiving baskets are a sign of a compassionate heart, of sharing and distribution of abundance.

Still, the hungry need justice: access to three squares a day without having to go to jail to get them. There are no agricultural reasons for hunger in the America. There is no shortage of food in the United States. Hunger results from greed, from a lack of public will to feed the hungry, and from public policy that creates, maintains, and eases the flow of food to those who are already full and away from those who are hungry.

What would gleaning laws or just laws taste like? Is it possible in this land of plenty to imagine three

nutritious meals a day as a human right? Is it too late in the Apocalyptic Time Zone for us to move from surplus to abundance? From charity to justice? From no to yes? From this filthy rotten system that creates hunger in the land to a just Republic, democratic and equal? The performance and faith of the Festival of Shelters will teach, form, and move us to say yes, yes, yes.

Try it and see.

3. Rest

The third theme in describing the Festival of Shelters as a harvest festival is rest. Basic to the Bible, central to the Christian way of life in modern America, at the heart of the yearnings of our Mother, Yahweh-Elohim, is the need for rest and the structures that produce rest. Rest for the land, rest for animals, rest for women and girls, boys and men: the God of the Sabbath and Festival of Shelters commands rest.

The land must rest. So farmers and city dwellers go to the land in booths and tents and shelters to watch, listen, remember, hope, dream, and play on the land. They do not go to work, an impossible possibility in our acquisitive, competitive, greedy Empire. Most folk today consider worship and even political engagements a waste of time. If we are not busy making money, then we must be entertained. Rest in American culture is resistance for life, engagement in the revolution of values for which Jesus and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. bled to death so that we might live another way.

The Festival of Shelters teaches us to renew the dignity and respect for land. We are partners with God. We are partners with the earth. We are made of rich and lovely soil. We express our thanksgiving to God for the earth, for land, by giving the land rest and moving from the Festival of Shelters to the daily practice of Earth Care. We now know that despite the Petrine denial that has infested our political leaders over the last sixty years that the Earth is dying.

We now know that the payment is due for having worked the earth compulsively since the Industrial

Revolution knocked us unconscious three hundred years ago. The earth, sky, and sea are in rebellion against us. God hears the cry of the suffering fish and wounded trees, the chemically fertilized soil, and polluted rivers. There is a direct relationship between the failure to honor the Creator and creation and the flaming success of child pornography in our restless way of life. The Festival of Shelters is a worship celebration: it shatters the weapons of mass distraction and remakes us in the image of God for liberation, justice, health. Yes, these are the fruits of rest.

As the land rests, we rest. We, like the earth, tire and wear down. We even forget who we are and what we stand for. Fatigue is a seed of apathy. Rest is a time of renewal. Rest is the time to remember and hope. Memory will teach us of just laws needed to ensure that everyone will have their daily bread. Memory will instruct us that those who love God protect the earth. And memory is a primary resource for the nurturing of the compassionate heart. Rest. Slow down. Truth can move no faster than 3mph, the speed of a human being walking on the good earth or on the streets.

Rest is a sign of God's presence in our lives and in our community. Left to the devices and desires of our own hearts we will get up early and work late each night (Psalm 127). Where there is no God and where compassionate hearts are lacking there is compulsive workaholism and deep addiction to doing, to activism, to making money, to entertainment, to talking on cell phones, or to taking on five movement causes. The results of the lack of rest for the busy professionals are boredom, moral blindness, hardness of heart, violence, and narcissism. For the poor, whose poverty is the hardest work devised by the powers of the Evil One, bone weariness is the daily burden.

Rest as part of the rhythm of creation is a response to good work and is a part of the harvest itself. As the grain nestles still and quiet on the October stalk, so we sit and listen in stillness and celebrations to the God

who has fashioned us and grants us freedom from the egotistical, compulsive push to work.

The Festival of Shelters is an occasion when we may present to our communities and the larger society such questions as: Why is there so little rest on the land and within ourselves? How may we live in acknowledgment that a bountiful harvest is likely to create greed and a sense of scarcity? How do we build trust and live by promises that enable all disciples and citizens to perform good work, to celebrate harvest, and to furbish their lives with rest and play?

What Is the Festival of Shelters? A Celebration of Liberation and Justice

The peculiar genius of Hebrew worship at the Festival of Shelters is weaving together agricultural harvest needs and the drama of liberation and redemption. Liberation alone is never enough. Liberation without redemption is immature, individualistic, aimless consumerism, like the majority of those who pursue life at the center of church and society. Liberation without redemption is revivalism. It is mega-church and football stadium religion. Liberation without redemption is like freedom without responsibility, like emancipation without equality. It is yucky.

Earth's bounty and the promises of Yahweh-Elohim—God of the Exodus, God of the Oppressed—are sown and harvested together. God the Creator is God the Liberator/Redeemer. Gleaning is a right, rest for the worker and for animals is law, and the land shall lie fallow for rest: all of these ways of being are inherent in the harvest doxology. Political freedom, economic rights, and the compassion to share abundance form part of the same festival. This, and more, because of the character of Yahweh-Elohim: the Creator who is for us and for the land as Liberator/Redeemer.

Psalms 146 expresses this doxology and political vision beautifully:

Praise our Creator!
Praise our Redeemer, O my soul!
We will praise Yahweh-Elohim as long as we live;
We will sing to our God all our lives long.
Don't put your trust in human leaders;
no human being can save you.
When they die, they return to the dust,
on that day all their plans come to an end.
Blessed are those who have the God
of Jacob and Leah and Rachel
of Dorothy and Martin and Clarence
to help them
And who depend on Yahweh-Elohim
The God of the Hebrew Slaves,
The Creator of heaven, earth, and the sea,
and all that is in them.
The God of Hope always keeps her promises;
The God of the Prophets judges in favor of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
Our God of Healing and Courage
sets prisoners free
and gives sight to the blind.
Yahweh-Elohim lifts those who have fallen;
The Holy One loves those who hunger and thirst
for justice;
They shall be satisfied.
The Compassionate One protects the immigrants who
live in our land
She helps widows and orphans,
but the way of the wicked
is turned upside down
by the God of justice.
Yahweh-Elohim is our God forever.
Our God will lead us for all time.
Praise the Creator
Praise the Redeemer!
(Good News Bible, adapted by Open Door Community.)

In the Hebrew Scriptures the source of doxology is the remembrance of the community's history, law, the prophets, and good food. Out of memory flows the courage and hope to act: to worship in thanksgiving and to build a social order of justice based upon good law and mercy. In these ways, the individual and her community live in the process of conversion and reordering of life toward compassion and social responsibility. The greatest threat to Yahweh-Elohim is not sin and evil, but forgetfulness, which is a fundamental source of sin and evil. Forgetfulness leads to the chasing after other gods. It leads to a belief that we, individually and communally, find meaning and fulfillment by having surplus money, and/or good works, or security in the military, or in living behind fences and calling for harsh prison sentences.

The Festival of Shelters is a harvest-thanksgiving celebration sharing the ripe fruit and grain. It is a call to the people of God to remember-in-action the life and character of the maker of the harvest. In the Festival of Shelters, as in the nature of the Judeo-Christian faith, creation, and salvation, land and human history, bread and politics cannot be separated. So how in the hell can there be hunger and apathetic greed, racism and class wars in the American Church and the nation? How in the hell can we be so fat? Drive gas-guzzling cars? Have trophy housing costing more than a million dollars? Develop private prisons? Be at war? Criminalize poverty?

Yahweh-Elohim believes that when we remember who we are and what we stand for—then justice will roll down like waters, fill the night shelters and prisons, the stock market and brothels, the valleys and the mountaintops. The delight of the Harvest Festival will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. Nonetheless, Yahweh-Elohim is an adult, notwithstanding the stench from the reductionism of Christmas and Easter. She is frightened and threatened by forgetfulness, wounded by injustice. She suffers keenly from our hardness of heart. As a means to fight forgetfulness, let us root the family of faith in the memory of God's life in nature and human

history. Let us nurture the land and laborers at work and rest, and build the new society in the shell of the old by compassion and justice. Yahweh-Elohim invites, nay commands, the people of God to enact the Festival of Shelters each year.

The Biblical Story behind Sukkoth

The harvest festival in Israel, even eating itself, calls the community to return in memory and metaphor to the wilderness wanderings between slavery in Egyptland and homemaking in Canaan land. For forty years in the wilderness, God provided manna and quail. In Palestine, having lost dependence upon food from the sky, what would happen to a people who forgot their roots and who came to believe that the harvest was of their own doing, a human achievement? Likewise, when a community moves from tents and booths following long, frightened wanderings, homeless and abused, then becomes homebuilders in their own land, what befalls such a people? Do they forget the builder of house? Do they forget that human hands do not make our homes? Might they embrace property rights and post “no trespassing” signs cursing those who walk by, while security lights and video cameras record their neighbors turned strangers? Might they with surplus income and maggoty money build extra rooms through the attics, lined with cedar and painted in vermilion? Would they furnish their homes with the artifacts from Persia or Ghana?

Or, far worse, what if this way of living, consuming, and building—this manner of fighting wars for security and oil—had them believing that they deserved such possessions? What if their hard-earned money or inherited wealth made them authors of their political freedom and economic success? Might one discover Humvee war-like cars racing to an aquarium to see the killer whales and McMansions replacing bungalows in poor folks’ neighborhoods? Would they be ashamed of this abrogated life lived in the presence of hungry folk

and of twenty thousand homeless human beings made in God's image? Yep. It can happen. Ask any Palestinian or Native American Indian or poor Black person today.

The most helpful scripture in understanding the importance and purpose of the Festival of Shelters is Deuteronomy 8. The entire chapter speaks to creation and redemption, and verses 11-20 deserve special attention. Moses speaks:

Make certain that you do not forget the Lord your God; do not fail to obey any of God's laws that I am giving you today. When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep (cars and golf carts), your silver and gold (your careers with full medical benefits), and all your other possessions have increased (iPods, computers, dancing cell phones), make sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. The Liberator/Redeemer led you through that vast and terrifying desert where there were poisonous snakes and scorpions. In that dry and waterless land she made water flow out of solid rock for you. In the desert she gave you manna to eat, food that your ancestors had never eaten. He sent hardships on you to test you, so that in the end he could bless you with good things. So then, you must never think that you have made yourselves wealthy by your own power and strength. Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to become rich. She does this because God is still faithful today to the covenant made with your ancestors. Never forget the Lord your God or turn to other gods to worship and serve them. If you do, then I warn you today that you will certainly be destroyed. If you do not obey the Lord, then you will be destroyed . . .

(GNB, adapted by Open Door Community)

Verses 17 and 19b are gifts to us flowing with love and judgment as we, guided by the Holy Spirit, seek to understand contemporary American life and fidelity to the faith of Jesus the Jewish Messiah.

So then, you must never think that you made yourselves wealthy by your own power and strength...

If you do, then I warn you today that you will be certainly destroyed."

Destroyed! Not by the terrorist, not by Osama Bin Laden, not by Iran or Russia. The Word of God, according to Yahweh-Elohim, teaches us that the seeds of destruction of the American Empire and the mainline churches germinate within our values and idols: sexism, homophobia, white supremacy, the wealthy declaring some folk disposable and unworthy, the thrill of violence, comfort, and boredom with simple acts of kindness and rest.

We have, from the listening posts of streets and prisons, heard the Forgotten God, felt the sting and starvation from unjust laws. Grief has bubbled in our hearts. We see folk, from the seeing sites among the crushed and maligned, who have come to believe, at least in many places, that our economic system is the source of our injustice toward the poor of the globe. Yes! That is why we went to war with Iraq.

Living in a House as Present Danger

The Festival of Shelters is a thanksgiving celebration for the harvest and redemption, which God is giving to the people. The festival is rooted in memory and branches out into hope. The harvest grain, the grape, and the olive are vehicles of God's voice calling the people to turn their minds and hearts to the cries of their ancestors for manna and quail as they wandered poor, homeless, and afraid across the desert. Memory teaches the people that when God hears the cry of the hungry, bread and meat appear. Within this grace and love resides the danger that a plenteous harvest of grace and grain will turn into idolatry. Within this gift lies the belief and finally the cultural assumption that one can live on bread alone, forgetting the Word of God. The pride of production claims that food, the harvest, is our achievement. Additionally, a series of good harvests may lead the people to believe they deserve their food and to expect a surplus. Food then becomes a political tool to preserve a nation's power and wealth, as starvation worldwide grows like a mudslide. The Festival of Shelters as memory and hope is a necessity among God's people, an alternative consciousness and means of life. Thus, Yahweh-Elohim commands its practice and observance.

Not only can bellies filled with food enslave us in cages of forgetfulness. So does living in a house. The comfort and beauty of a house as well as its security induce forgetfulness and distraction, and can easily lead to idolatry and hearts of stone. So Yahweh-Elohim calls the people to the memories of wilderness wanderings—to the history of homelessness (Deuteronomy 8:14-16).

The original purpose of the booths and tents that form part of the harvest festival may have been to house human scarecrows. People living in the fields during harvest would protect the food from birds, animals, and the wealthy who wanted the widows' mite. The God of Creation is not satisfied with bread alone. As food served

as a reminder of manna and quail, the shelters pointed to the wilderness wanderings so formative in Israel's understanding of the sources of compassion and justice. Israel understood that houses are places of forgetfulness. Without experiences of homelessness, the people of God will forget the God of the homeless and may even turn upon the homeless themselves and blame them for their own victimization. God forbid!

Ah, what a brilliant way to build worship: A liturgy of embodied memory with God at our center. A call to good work and simple rest to deepen the community's spirituality. Yahweh-Elohim, through the voice of the priests, called all the people to leave their houses, their comfort zones, where at ease in Zion they tended to forget the radical, world-redeeming mission of the people of Israel (for there is no salvation apart from the Jews). "Go," she said, "from thy house to the farm land, the public square, upon thy roof for a re-visioning, a radical remembrance, with which I shall bless you in body, soul, and strength." There amid the grain and olive trees, near the tabernacle or temple and in the courtyard the girls and boys, men and women, circumcised and foreigner within thy gates returned to the root of memory. Here outside the protection of their homes, the people came with an attitude of gratitude for harvest and to remember their homeless wanderings and redemption in the wilderness school. They came to study the Prophets and Torah. They came to repent and mature in their journey with Yahweh-Elohim. They came, to use the words of that wild visionary Ezekiel, "to exchange hearts of stone for hearts of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19).

So too, the Holy One, who yearns for us to make it right, invites us today to leave our houses, condos, apartments, SROs, catholes, lofts, townhouses, night shelters, half-way houses, prison cells, hotels, nursing homes, insane asylums and to go into city parks, shopping-mall parking lots, steps of city hall, your front yard, your church yard, near your county jail, there to

make an urban camp. There, together and harassed by the powers of domination, we remember our liberation and sing songs of thanksgiving for food, houses, good work, friends, money, books, clothes, and all our other life-giving possessions. Should we not find the time or have the interest: Beware. For if we do not observe the Festival of Shelters, according to the Word, we will “become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt where you were slaves” (Deuteronomy 8:14).

Conclusion and Reiteration

The greatest threat to Judaism and Christianity is the threat of forgetting God and the consequent idolatry of self. The razor-edge danger of our life led by the gracious providence of God is that abundance, success, and prosperity are always perverted into surplus, meritocracy, and greed. Sadly enough, the seeds of idolatry are mixed into the grain, wine, and fruit of a good harvest. There is no better illustration of the mixing of grain and tares than the history of white folks in America. The Festival of Shelters is God-given antidote to the destruction of the self and the loss of radical belief. The Festival of Shelters recalls us to practice the salvific mission of the faithful for all people who on earth do dwell. The crucial biblical insight, suggested above, is the unity of creation and redemption, harvest and our history of homelessness, bread and politics. Justice exists as part of these connections. Writing from jail, Dr. King in Pauline fashion wrote it famously: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

What if people of faith reap prosperity from the poverty and cheap labor of others? What if we allow our abundance to become the surplus for investment capitalism? Then we will, as many do, shout at the poor

and honk like hell when an aged person cannot cross the street in the time allotted by the urban engineers. We might write blaming letters to the editors, screaming that we do not want the poor and their trash in our neighborhoods. We might even build political parties and platforms that deny the poor economic access to basic needs. We could claim the harvest as our own, forgetting the radical, even revolutionary, roots of biblical faith. We could develop shameful faith statements and not be ashamed but proud of them:

“I did it!”

“I deserve it. It’s mine!”

“God helps those who help themselves.”

“Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. I did.”

“The poor are lazy bums; they ought to get a job.”

The above shameless confessions are shouts and statements we hear every day in our lives and work at the Open Door. Often, when screamed from the comfort of a car, a middle finger is included. Our homeless and hungry friends watch in anger and woundedness.

Should this be so among us of faith, however, the consequences are dire and dirty. We shall be destroyed. The earth is dying today. What about the passion and radical vitality of discipleship? We are dying from the inside-out, from idolatry, blindness, and greed; that is, we are dying from hardness of heart.

The God of Creation and Liberation/Redemption, the Lord of the Harvest, says to us in the land of plenty: Come and celebrate the goodness of your life, your success, and possessions, by remembering who I am. For “I am the Lord thy God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The Lord says, “I love you.” Listen to Yahweh-Elohim’s love song:

“Israel, the Lord who created you says,

Do not be afraid—I will save you.

I have called you by name—you are mine.
When you pass through deep waters, I will be
with you;
your troubles will not overwhelm you.
When you pass through fire, you will not be
burned;
the hard trials that come will not hurt you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the holy God of Israel, who saves you.
You are precious to me
and because I love you and give you honour.
Do not be afraid—I am with you!
You are my own people, and I created them to
bring me glory.”
(*Isaiah 43:1-3, 4b, 7b, Good News Bible*)

While we were white middle-class worshipers of mammon, Yahweh-Elohim heard our groans. While we were African Americans beaten down by the system of white supremacy in the churches and society, even accepting the white lies, the Black Jesus, the dark-skinned Jew, taught us redemption songs from outside the Empire. While we men used women to soothe the macho egos that bully the world, the Holy One heard our moans and groans for righteousness, for community, family, mutuality. While we were yet slaves to the ideologies of the rich, to the systems of exploitation of earth and sky and sea, to the domination of workers—while we were refusers of bread and medical care as human rights—Yahweh-Elohim introduced the liberation life, she joined our struggle, she leads us this hour. While our future belonged to the bank and credit-card debt controlled our lives, while we ate and ate our way toward a deeper and deeper hunger that even the imported foodstuffs taken from the mouths of the starving in Africa could not satisfy, Jesus Christ hung on the cross for us. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a Birmingham jail for us. Rachel Corrie was crushed by a

bulldozer in Israel for us.

"I came to you and I am lifting you up and out of this deathly way of life," says God our liberator. "I call you out of the center to the margins of Empire and domination. I cared for you when you were wandering in the wilderness of modern life. Now you have work, most of you have a house, a community, a pastor, a rabbi, or a priest. Most of you eat three meals a day. You have transportation. Most of you go to the movies and listen to music. You have learned how to party as I taught the folk two thousand years ago in Canaan. All of this is good, very good. But beware, lest you forget me.

Now, I give you the Festival of Shelters as the way to be thankful for your harvest and for the goodness in your life. Know in your harvest that you are blessed. I am your blessing. Give witness to your thanksgiving by remembering your redemption: Stand in solidarity with the homeless people in your city, near your farm, and with the prisoners across every state in this land. Feed them, house them. Free them."

The Festival of Shelters offers a dramatic presentation to the city or to your local neighborhood of your thankfulness for the goodness of life and of your commitment and solidarity to the poor and prisoner. For one week each year leave your houses and put your bodies where your doctrines are. Build small shelters and pitch tents. Feed the hungry and worship Yahweh-Elohim together. Then, on the final evening, have a biblical banquet. Invite the lame and lonely, the poor and outcast, the ex-convict and the county district attorney. Invite the police and a member of city council. Invite a military recruiter and a maimed soldier.

As people of faith participating in this doxology and remembrance of our shared past, we incarnate the presence of our God who shares bread and freedom, who wills a good and thankful life for every single person, and who aches for the homeless and prisoner among us. The Festival of Shelters will help us, and all

citizens, to enlarge our hearts. We will be able in the words of St. John of the Cross “to put love where we find no love.” Compassion is the basis of love for others. Responsibility is the foundation of a redemptive judicial system. Compassion with fire and love, anger and mercy, is the root of a prophetic religion and the never-ending engagement for justice.

We the people in the American Empire are dying. The earth is dying. Jesus, The Human One and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have been castrated and domesticated. We have lost their core aims and purposes. We must find ways to live and worship that build compassionate hearts and that bring new life to this system of death. We have lost our way. Our faith requires children with ears to hear the groans of the poor and to see the plight of the prisoner and then to act by establishing justice and making mercy. The Festival of Shelters is a resource for such a radical rebirth of wonder.

So it is: We go out into the streets with the homeless as our guides, calling ourselves and our city to repentance and conversion. Our roots and branches are in the church, not American culture, so filled with death and greed. We practice the Festival of Shelters to keep hope alive. We go to demonstrate in our flesh the presence, love, and commitment of the Church to the peace and justice struggle. Therefore, we position ourselves in readiness for God’s intrusion into our lives and the liberation of the poor. This is costly. Some of us will go to jail. Some to prison. Many will bleed, others will lose pulpits and jobs much as our mentors, who heard the cry of Jesus in his Blackness and his brown Vietnam skin, did in the 1960s. The cost of discipleship is high. Let no quack preacher tease you into the comfort zone of dead folk walking. The invitation is not to the church sanctuary but to the streets, where the Evil One reigns in power and glory over this filthy rotten system.

If the Bible is a book of truth, then Yahweh-Elohim is acting to set the oppressed free, to give sight to the

blind, to house the homeless, to feed the hungry, to set the prisoner at liberty, to stop the death penalty, to build the Beloved Community of God on earth as it is in heaven—if God is not at this work, visibly, then the Bible is a book of falsehoods and baloney. If the Bible is not true, then we people of faith are to be the most pitied among the human family. We are living a lie.

The Festival of Shelters is a way of being in the world for the sake of the world. It is a way of biblical truth, a way of readiness for the enactment of the Reign of God, of justice and mercy.

Finally, we go out into the streets, celebrating, suffering the street's truth, witnessing, being transformed. We go out as the Body of Jesus Christ. We are a diverse band of people who demonstrate in the heart of the city the life of faithful compassion.

Won't you join us? Won't you observe the Festival of Shelters in your church and city next fall? We pray you will. Thank you.



1989 Woodruff Park

The Festival of Shelters offers a dramatic presentation of your thankfulness for the goodness of life and of your commitment to the poor and prisoner.





1990 Woodruff Park



1993 Woodruff Park

*It is not sufficient until justice rolls down
the streets of your city and righteousness
becomes the water that sustains both you
and your neighbor.*



Atlanta City Hall





2004 Open Door





*Bible Study at Central Presbyterian across
from the Georgia State Capitol*

Putting Scripture into Practice: Suggestions for Performing a Festival of Shelters

By Heather Barger

In preparation for the Festival of Shelters at the Open Door in 2005, Dick Rustay led a reflection on Deuteronomy 8:11-20 with the residential community that shaped our understanding of the significance of the Festival for our lives. Walter Brueggeman had done a presentation at the Open Door in 1990 highlighting Deuteronomy's concern with forgetfulness as central to the practice of the Festival of Shelters. Houses are a place where we forget, and we can only remember the experience of wandering in the wilderness and God's gift of protection by coming out of our homes and onto the streets. Dick expanded on this idea in his own study emphasizing three themes: remembrance, resistance, and rejoicing. These themes became a helpful framework for our community to talk about the theological and political significance of the Festival and for our planning of liturgy and action. We developed the following brief statement to articulate the meaning of the Festival for the life of our community and for all people of faith:

The Festival of Shelters is an ancient Hebrew Festival that calls us to remember, resist and rejoice. We remember that we are all homeless wanderers in a land that is not our own. We resist the powers of pride and greed that create wealth for a few and poverty for many. And we rejoice that God has given us a harvest which provides more than enough for abundant life for all. The Festival commemorates God's instructions to Moses and the Hebrews: "You shall live in shelters seven days: all citizens of the land shall live in shelters..." (Leviticus 23:42). The Festival calls all of God's people, especially those who live in good houses and celebrate plentiful harvest, to not forget the God who rescued us from our slavery in Egypt and provided for us in our thirst

and hunger in the wilderness. As we remember, resist, and rejoice, we are moved to share out of our bounty and seek justice for the poor and homeless wanderers of our day.

One of the primary aims of this book is to suggest the Festival of Shelters as a liturgical resource for Christians who seek to respond to God's call to justice and peace-making. In this chapter, we will provide some concrete suggestions for how you might create a Festival of Shelters within the context of your own community or congregation. I have framed these suggestions within the three themes of remembrance, resistance, and rejoicing because of the significance of these themes in our own reflection and planning. I also include a list of biblical references to the Festival of Shelters at the end of this section. As a starting point, I would offer that any community who desires to perform this Festival begin with biblical reflection and prayer together, perhaps on the streets or in homeless shelter. You may find that different themes emerge out of your own particular context and time that may be more helpful for your planning. But hopefully some of the wisdom of our ongoing practice as well as that of other communities who have begun their own version of the Festival may serve to get your conversation started. We hope, too, that you will share your reflections on your practice of the Festival with us so that we may learn from one another's experience and grow in our understanding of the faith together. We would also like to note your practice in the Open Door's newspaper, *Hospitality*.

Remember

Obey faithfully all the laws that I have given you today, so that you may live, increase in number, and occupy the land that the Lord promised to your ancestors. Remember how the Lord your God led you on this long journey through the desert these past forty years, sending hardships to test you, so that God might know what you

intended to do and whether you would obey God's commands...

When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. The Lord led you through that vast and terrifying desert where there were poisonous snakes and scorpions. In that dry and waterless land God made water flow out from solid rock for you. In the desert God gave you manna to eat, food that your ancestors had never eaten. The Lord sent hardships on you to test you, so that in the end God could bless you with good things. Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to become rich. God does this because God is still faithful today to the covenant that God made with your ancestors. Never forget the Lord your God or turn to other gods to worship and serve them. If you do, then I warn you today that you will certainly be destroyed.

(Deuteronomy 8:1-2, 12-20, Good News Translation)

What do we remember?

The text in Deuteronomy instructs us to remember that our faith origin is that of homeless refugees rescued out of slavery and provided for by Yahweh Elohim in the wilderness. We are not a self-made people nor are our homes, wealth, or security the product of our own work. All that we have is a gift from God, and we remember that Yahweh Elohim, the God of compassion and justice, has liberated us from slavery to Empire not to hoard what we have to the exclusion and oppression of others, but to live with compassion and justice that all people would have access to God's gift of abundant life.

How do we remember?

The wisdom of the Festival of Shelters is that our bodies have memory. We must come out of our homes and spend time in the contemporary spaces of “wilderness” in order to remember the experience of being homeless wanderers and the protection and compassion of Yahweh Elohim. We cannot remember this experience by simply studying it or praying about it. Our spiritual practice is rooted in our bodies, and this Festival urges us to place our bodies where we will experience, if only for a short time, discomfort, homelessness, and also God’s presence.

David Janzen of Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois visited the Open Door during the Festival of Shelters in 2002. He recalls the impact that a few days and a night on the streets of Atlanta during the Festival had on his body and soul. “A night of trying to sleep on the sidewalk has the effect of adjusting my bones and my theology,” he says. David came to understand the words of Psalm 23, the text used in a biblical reflection during that year’s Festival, very differently after his experience in the “wilderness”: “Homeless for a night, we suddenly feel the presence of our enemies – rats scurrying the park, temperatures plunging below 40, and police stationed across the street, guardians of propriety and good order for those with houses. Certainly we had known a banquet all day long, but God’s house seems rather large and drafty, and we wonder if ‘as long as I live’ will last until morning.” David also reflected that the following day he experienced a taste a strange and wonderful transformation as homeless friends greeted him and welcomed him into their community – a foretaste of the Beloved Community in which the first are last and the last first.^a

Peter Steihler, formerly of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker and now of the San Bruno Catholic Worker, once reflected on the LACW’s practice of the Festival of Shelters and the importance of spending both days and nights in the garden on Skid Row where they regularly

serve meals to homeless friends. He added, “Besides our normal serving days in the garden, we also spent a day of reflection there with our regular bible study focused on the Festival and the justice it calls us to en flesh. We ended our day of reflection with a liturgy in the garden using the readings from our procession through the wilderness of downtown and using cardboard as our altar cloth.”^b Biblical reflection and worship in the “wilderness” alongside our homeless sisters and brothers is central to our understanding of the call of this Festival. In this practice, we interpret Scripture through lenses shaped by the suffering of homeless sisters and brothers. Likewise, our interpretation of our brief experience of the “wilderness” of the streets is framed by our study of Scripture and its calls to justice and compassion.

Questions for Reflection and Planning

1. Where in our lives and in our city do we see evidence of our forgetfulness of God’s liberation and the exclusion of some from God’s gifts of abundant life?
2. Who are the homeless wanderers and refugees with whom we could be in solidarity in our community?
3. What are the spaces of “wilderness” in my city or town? Where are the contested spaces between the homeless poor and the powers that be (i.e. government, police, big business, gentrification)?

Resistance

Even though the returning exiles were afraid of the people who were living in the land, they rebuilt the altar where it had stood before. Then they began once again to burn on it the regular morning and evening sacrifices. They celebrated the Festival of Shelters according to the regulations; each day they offered the sacrifices required for that day.

(Ezra 3:3-4, Good News Translation)

What do we resist?

To worship the Yahweh Elohim, the God of compassion and justice, is to resist the gods of the dominant American culture - the idols of pride and greed that would convince us that our mega-mansions, gourmet food, Humvees, and plasma TVs are all things that we have earned by our own power, intellect, or work. Social and economic structures have been built in reverence to those idols to the exclusion and death of the poor. As the above passage from Ezra teaches, we should not be afraid to claim our identity as people of Yahweh Elohim, but instead practice public worship as an act of resistance to the powers of militarism, materialism, and racism that prevent many people from accessing the promise of abundant life.

How do we resist?

One of the ways we have seen the powers of pride and greed at work in our city is in the systematic “sanitization” of downtown Atlanta. This movement to push poor people out of downtown spurred on by the business community and acted out by the police is most conspicuous in the shrinking of real public space. Therefore one way to resist these cultural idols of pride and greed is to reclaim public spaces where the poor are being pushed out and locked up. The Open Door has primarily celebrated the Festival of Shelters in Woodruff

Park, a park downtown which has historically been a gathering and resting place for homeless people but over the course of the last decade has been more aggressively targeted by the powers that be as a threat to downtown business and tourism. By reclaiming this space for and with homeless people, we say “NO!” to the powers that wish to turn this park into a playground for the rich and make the poor disappear.

Stan Saunders, professor at New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, once reflected during a Festival of Shelters about why we gather in Woodruff Park: “We come among the marvelous buildings because we remember that God is the one who brought us out of the wilderness, who preserves our life, and who gives us all that we need today. We gather in Woodruff Park to remember God and in this way to gain discernment and vision for our ongoing journey towards God’s redemption of this world.”^c

One of the most powerful acts of resistance that we can practice in these contested spaces is to share food with hungry friends. In a society that tells us there is simply not enough to go around, offering food that satisfies and costs nothing to anyone who is hungry is a scandalous act. When we serve meals downtown during the Festival of Shelters, we extend the invitation to anyone: businesspersons, politicians, homeless friends, shopkeepers, sanitation workers, mothers and fathers with children. This invitation to all to share a meal not only refutes the lie that there is not enough food for everyone to be fed. It also serves as a prophetic vision of the Beloved Community on earth: a community in which rich and poor, women and men, people of color and white folks, gay and straight, blind and sighted, homeless people and politicians will all sit at the banquet table and share a meal together.

In addition, we demonstrate carrying signs with messages like “Housing is Human Right” and “Millions on Prisons, Zero on Housing.” At times we have built an Ark of the Covenant or sukkahs in public spaces.

The L.A. Catholic Worker community once built their sukkah with wooden pallets and cardboard, in addition to the palm fronds and fruit branches traditionally used in the Hebrew tradition, to mirror materials commonly used for beds by friends on the streets.^d We engage in conversation with passersby and pass out flyers explaining the significance of the Festival of Shelters. We study the bible and worship with hungry and homeless people in this contested space to remind ourselves and others that Yahweh Elohim, not money nor political power nor intellect, is our Liberator and Provider, and that our faithfulness to Yahweh Elohim is rooted in our compassion towards those who are homeless wanderers among us today.

Questions for Reflection and Planning

1. Where do we see the powers of pride and greed affecting the poor in our community or city? How are we complicit with those powers?
2. Where are the contested spaces in our city? How can we “reduce the distance” between ourselves and the poor of our city?
3. What kinds of public acts of resistance might we perform in these spaces as part of a Festival of Shelters (e.g. sleep out with the homeless, open our homes, churches, campus, for a “sleep-in” with the homeless)?

Rejoice

After you have threshed all your grain and pressed all your grapes, celebrate the Festival of Shelters for seven days. Enjoy it with your children, your servants, and the Levites, foreigners, orphans and widows who live in your towns. Honor the Lord your God by celebrating this festival for seven days at the one place of worship. Be joyful, because the Lord has blessed your harvest and your work.

(Deuteronomy 16: 13-15, Good News Translation)

All the people who had come back from captivity built shelters and lived in them. This was the first time it had been done since the days of Joshua son of Nun, and everybody was excited and happy. From the first day of the festival to the last they read a part of God's Law every day. They celebrated for seven days, and on the eighth day there was a closing ceremony, as required in the Law.

(Nehemiah 8:17-18, Good News Translation)

Why do we rejoice?

We rejoice because our God has blessed the earth and the work of our hands so that the entire community may enjoy the good gifts of the harvest. We rejoice that our God is a God of liberation who has rescued us from slavery to the American Empire so that we may no longer be bound by the culture of consumerism and individualism. Yahweh Elohim has protected us in our wandering in the desert of mainline American life and provides us now with an abundant harvest so that all people would be fed and satisfied.

How do we rejoice?

Sharing a meal among diverse, hungry friends not only serves as an act of resistance, but also of rejoicing. Justice is important, but supper is essential. To share good food and drink and companionship with one another at table is a vision of the Beloved Community come on earth. In sharing bread and our lives with one another we are nourished, and we have the privilege of hearing the firsthand experience of our homeless friends who are wandering in the modern-day urban wilderness. We are reminded as we enjoy companionship with new friends that God's vision of liberation is only fulfilled in diversity. None of us can be fed and satisfied if all of us are not fed and satisfied. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

As recounted in the passage in Nehemiah, the Israelite community completed their celebration of the Festival of Shelters with a closing ceremony. We at the Open Door mark the conclusion of our festival with a celebratory meal at our home with friends who have shared the journey in the wilderness of the streets with us. We have a special meal prepared of the most delicious food, all one can eat plus carry-out bags! This is a blessed occasion to honor our work as a community in performing the festival, celebrate the relationships that have been formed in that experience, and give thanks to our God for a bountiful harvest. Peter Stiehler describes how this final celebration also serves as a time for those who have been present at the Festival to reflect together on the many blessings that they experienced throughout the week. During their closing meal together, members of the L.A. Catholic Worker recalled the blessing of deepened relationships with friends on the streets and the joy of spending more time in the garden where they regularly serve meals to those friends.^c This final celebration is a manifestation of the truth that while the road to justice is costly, our journey together is also full of great joy.

Scripture References for Liturgy and Reflection on Festival of Shelters

Leviticus
23:33-36, 39-43
Deuteronomy
8, 16:13-17, 31:9-13
Joshua
24:13
1 Kings
8:62-66
Ezra 3:3-4
Nehemiah 8:13-18
Psalm 27:4-6
Psalm 84 (psalm of pilgrimage to the temple for FOS)
Psalm 146
Isaiah 58:1-12
Isaiah 65:17-25
Zechariah 14:16-19
John 7:1-52
Revelation 7:9-17

Questions for Reflection and Planning

1. Where can we serve meals to hungry friends in our community or city? Who can help us prepare the meals? How will we deal with local ordinances and police that may attempt to prevent us from obeying Jesus?
2. Where shall we hold a final celebratory meal for our Festival of Shelters? Is there a group or organization that could provide this meal for us?
3. What “fruits of the harvest” did we experience in our participation in the Festival?
4. How does the Festival of Shelters shape our commitment to house the homeless and work for food and housing as basic human rights?

General Questions for Reflection and Planning of a Festival of Shelters

1. What is the significance of the Festival of Shelters for our particular time and in our local context? What themes emerge related to the needs of the poor and homeless people in our community?
2. What individuals, faith communities, and/or organizations should we invite to participate in planning and celebrating a Festival of Shelters?
3. What human and material resources do we have available for preparing and serving meals, planning and leading public worship, performing public action (e.g. signs, flyers, public speakers, etc.)?
4. What are typical resources used by our homeless friends (e.g. cardboard, wooden pallets, tents, shopping carts)? How might we incorporate these materials symbolically in our liturgy and action during the Festival of Shelters?

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- b. Steihler, Peter.
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- c. Saunders, Stan.
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- d. Janzen, 7.
- e. Steihler, 3

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This book is not for sale. Please eat rice and beans, not meat.

When you have harvested your fields, celebrate this festival for seven days, beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month... This regulation is to be kept by your descendants for all time to come. All the people of Israel shall live in shelters for seven days, so that your descendants may know that the Lord made the people of Israel live in simple shelters when God led them out of Egypt. Yahweh-Elohim is the Lord your God.

Leviticus 23:39, 41b-43

Make certain that you do not forget the Lord your God; do not fail to obey any of God's law that I am giving you today. When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.

Deuteronomy 8:11-14

The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give your clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.

Isaiah 58:6-7

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Dick Rustay is a beloved solid rock partner of the Open Door Community. He presides over the Wednesday soup kitchen and is a leader in biblical studies. Dick has read all of Walter Brueggemann's books! He visits Daniel Green of Georgia's death row. He and his Gladys have a garden at Dayspringfarm. Dick's specialty is compost.

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