

SAVING THE REMNANT

a sermon based on Jeremiah 31:7-13

Matthew 2:1-12

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EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Many children have a favorite *blanky* that was theirs either from birth or from very early on in their infancy. Each of our kids had a *blanky* and they held on to it until it fell apart. Our daughter Cynthia held onto hers until nothing was left but two little remnants, so small that she would pin it to her jammies when she went to bed each night. For some reason, that little bit of *blanky* pinned to her jammies, gave her a sense of comfort and security until eventually she put them away for safe keeping and as far as we know, she still has those remnants.

Jeremiah prophesied about another remnant: “*For thus says the LORD: ‘Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel.’*” Then he added, “*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the North, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.*” [Jer. 31:7-8]

So, what was left of Israel after all those years in exile, was the remnant that, in a manner of speaking, God kept close to him, so He wouldn’t lose them. This rag tag bunch of people who had nothing to their name except the clothes on their back and whatever they could carry back to Judah after being released from Babylonian captivity. No kings nor princes were among the returning remnant. No great notables. Just ordinary people like you and me.

You'd think that, if God wanted to re-build the kingdom, He'd have saved a few of the royal family, people who were used to ruling or, at least, had it in their blood. Over in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States, along with our allies, is attempting to re-build the infrastructure of those countries but they have to train many of the new leaders from scratch. They are building on the remnant, the people who, for the most part, are the least educated and seemingly ill-prepared to assume the mantle of leadership. The problem is, there is very little time to do it. Will the new leaders be able to develop enough trust among the various warring factions to get them to collaborate on a new and democratic government in which there will be equality among all the people? We can't be certain. But our job is to work with the remnant and help them as best we can and ask for God's help in the process.

To some extent, this was the problem God faced back in Jeremiah's day. He saved a remnant, but would they get it right this time or would they repeat the mistakes of their forebears? God would show them the way but they would have to decide whether they would follow God or go off on their own tangent. This was not the first time that God started re-building with people who seemed unsuited to the challenge.

Back in the beginning, it was not a young, healthy couple whom God chose to become the founders of our faith. Instead, it was an elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, well past child-bearing age, whom God chose.

It was not the first-born twin, Esau whom God chose to establish the twelve tribes of Israel. Instead, it was Jacob, the conniving, self-serving and cheating twin whom God chose.

It was not the older sons of Jesse among whom the prophet Samuel thought he would find the king to replace the disobedient King Saul. Instead, he anointed David, the youngest son, a mere boy who was so unlikely a candidate that he wasn't even brought in from the fields where he was tending his father's sheep.

Then, about 1,000 years later, it was not the powerful King Herod whom God chose

to proclaim the Good News to all the people. Instead, it was Jesus, born and raised in poverty, a nobody from Nazareth, who transformed the world through his faith in and obedience to God.

And then there are the kings, or wise men as the Bible calls them. We really don't know how many there were. We know they came from the East asking, "*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.*" [Mat. 2:1-2] This did not set well with Herod. He was, in fact, very alarmed to hear of his possible replacement by this infant, whoever he was.

Herod hung out with some of the most powerful people of his day, including Anthony, Cleopatra, and Octavius. And even though he and Caesar were on somewhat friendly terms, Herod was very nervous about keeping his job. So nervous, in fact, that because he thought his own family was plotting to kill him and take over his throne, he murdered his wife, his mother-in-law, and his sons. Caesar Augustus said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. You can bet that when Herod was troubled, all of Judea was troubled with him.

But the wise men continued on their way and we are told: *when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.* I have a story.

In the film "*Jacob the Liar*," Robin Williams plays an ordinary Jew, who along with other Jewish citizens of the city, was shut up in the ghetto of a Polish village during the Nazi occupation. He spread a false story that the Allies were defeating the Germans and would soon be at the camp. News of this spread throughout the

ghetto, bringing joy and hope. But when the Nazis thought that someone in camp had a clandestine radio, Jacob was afraid he might be found out and punished. The penalty for anyone caught with a radio, or even believed to own one, was death. Hoping to get the Nazis off his trail, Jacob told a friend that his story was a hoax. Tragically, a neighbor overheard him and committed suicide. Jacob was horrified at this but his friend encouraged him to keep up the imaginary broadcasts, which he had been conducting in an attic for the little girl whom he had taken in. The Jews in the community believed the “broadcasts” were real and this ordinary man who had no idea of his own potential, was able to help the remnant, those who were still alive, overcome their despair and have hope that their rescue was at hand.

Jeremiah, an ordinary man himself, gave the people hope in the midst of despair: *“Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coast lands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather them, and will keep them as a shepherd watches over a flock.’ For the LORD has ransomed the people and has redeemed the remnant from hands too strong for them.”* [Jer. 31:10-11] I have a story. Right after graduating from college, I left for Beckley, West Virginia where I was to direct a YMCA tutorial project in a small mining community called Glen Daniel. The staff were all college student volunteers who actually paid for their own transportation to and from the camp. We offered tutoring for any children who wanted to come. Over 150 children came to our camp. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, we taught them the three R’s – readin’, ‘ritin’ and ‘rithmetic – and we taught them how to swim in the local creek. On Tuesday and Thursday, we went to a nearby community that was all African American because integration had not yet come to the hills of West Virginia. The afternoons were devoted to baseball and, on Friday evenings, we taught the older kyds how to dance. It was the kind of experience that you come away from feeling that you got way more out of it than the people you were helping. This was brought home to me on the last day of the tutorial project.

A neighbor lady who had taught us how to make our own bread and how to cook

using government commodities, stopped by to say, “Goodbye.” She gave me a box that was wrapped in floral wallpaper she had left over from papering her living room. She said, “Go on, open it.” I carefully pulled the string away and unfolded the wrapping and lifted the box lid. Inside was a quilt she had made. I had tears in my eyes as I thanked her for this precious gift. She said, “Let me tell you about this here quilt. That pink and yellow material come from one of my favorite dresses that was gettin’ too tight for me to wear, what with middle-aged spread and all.” She smiled. “And the blue and white material come from my kitchen curtains that needed replacin’ cause they’d been up since the beginning of time and they were starting to rot from the sun. And the light green and lavender was my old table cloth that my middle boy ruined with catsup and I couldn’t get the stain out of it. We didn’t have much when we was growin’ up and neither did our kyds. We were taught to use it up and wear it out or do without.” She became emotional as she said, “You all came here and taught our kyds how to read and write and that would’ve been enough. But you did something more. You made them feel special and ain’t nobody ever done that before. My boy Jimmy actually said he was goin’ to ask about college when school starts up again. He says he thinks he wants to be a teacher. I couldn’t believe my ears! Why, for the past 3 or 4 generations, kyds in these here hills didn’t have nothin’ to look forward to but workin’ themselves to death in the mines. My husband is sick right now with sciliosis, that there minor’s lung disease and he won’t last out the year, I’m certain of it. In the eyes of the city folk, we don’t even exist. I’ve cleaned their houses and all they do is say we’re lazy and how they can’t leave any money lyin’ around cause we’ll take it. They don’t pay us no respect. So, to think that one of our children might go to college is more than a body can take in.”

She nodded toward the quilt. “This here quilt is all I could think of to give you. It’s pieces of all our lives stitched together with love and appreciation for all that you done for us here. And we won’t forget you, neither, you can count on it!” We were both crying by the time she was done and we reminisced about all our

experiences in the previous weeks. When I pulled out of Glen Daniel that next day, I left a part of my heart back there with those wonderful people and in exchange, I had a remnant of theirs in that beautiful quilt.

Jesus came to help us take the pieces of our lives and stitch them together with love. We are God's remnant, ordinary people of faith, gathered together to proclaim to all the world the Good News of Jesus Christ, that God loves each and everyone of us unconditionally. So, what are we waiting for? Let's get to stitchin'!

And let the people say, "Amen."