

## “Remnants”

Jeremiah 23:1-4

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By the time we get to this point in the early days of January, for most the season of Christmas is a thing of the past. Even though there are still a few days left in the Christmas season and Orthodox Christians do not celebrate the birth of Christ until January 6<sup>th</sup>, for many of us, the decorations have been taken down and stored away for another year. Our music playlists no longer include the familiar carols and music that filled the previous weeks. In the stores, much of the marked down Christmas inventory has been relegated to the discount bins. Chances are, what's left of your Christmas turkey has made its way into a soup. Maybe you've added a few pounds over the holidays! These are the things that remain from Christmas. After a season of plenty, of feasting and celebration, now we find ourselves at a point in time when what we are left with are the remnants of Christmas. The time has come to move on and move into the new year.

When we think of remnants, we think of the past...remnants are the scattered reminders of what was. As we find ourselves at the beginning of a new year, we can be more mindful of the remnants and the things that remain from not only the year that has passed but of the years that have passed. I believe that the older we get, we are more mindful of the remnants in our lives. To live through periods of time and certain experiences and stages in life is to be reminded of what once was that is no longer.

Not that long ago I was having a conversation with an elderly person that was reviewing with me her experience of downsizing and moving out of a house she had occupied for a long time. She was recalling all of the stuff that she had to sift through, all that she had accumulated through the decades of living in her house that eventually filled every closet and cupboard and nook and cranny. Old pictures, photographs, invitations to weddings and special occasions, books that had belonged to her husband, crafts that her children and grandchildren had made for her as gifts. All of those things were reminders of what was. She said to me whenever she opened up a photo album, or took out another box from a closet, it was if she was turning back

the clock. She said it was one of the most emotionally draining experiences she ever encountered. She knew that if she was to make her move, she had to let these things go, there was no way they were all going to fit in her new place, yet it wasn't easy. She mentioned how almost everything she touched, she smelled, she looked at, reminded her of times, or people, or places that either she had left, or had left her over the years. All of that letting go contributed to a certain feelings of weakness, loneliness, perhaps even abandonment in her life. It was as if she herself had become the remnant.

It would be easy for us to make a similar observation when we read through the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. It would be easy to read the book, at least parts of it as a story of abandonment, as the story of a people left behind. The book tells the story of a period of exile in the life of God's people. Jeremiah is one of the longest books in the Bible, and is important book its setting is during one of the most critical periods in the history of God's people Israel. Jeremiah speaks of a time when the first great temple in Jerusalem is destroyed and the people were forced to leave everything behind as they went into exile in the nation of Babylon.

When the people went into exile, it was a time of great crisis. After all, most people believed that God was in the temple in Jerusalem, to have the temple destroyed and be in exile was at a certain level to have had their hearts ripped out. The temple and the land, the things they smelled and touched and felt around them were a great source of their identity and filled their lives with meaning and promise. When it was all taken from them, when it was left behind, it was easy for the people of God to look back at their home from another land, another place and see the remnants of what was.

The people of God, collectively, had been around a long time. They carried with them the memories of better times, of security, strength and promise. To be in Babylon, was evidence that they had now become a remnant.

You know, it's not that difficult to feel like a remnant in this world. Remnants are all around us...remnants of what was. Sooner or later I believe we all become like remnants. It's like the story a friend of mine told me about when he once visited Ireland in order to do some genealogy and learn a little more about his family history. My friend's last name is Murphy, and

I'm not sure where he was visiting, but I do believe it was county Cork in the southernmost part of Ireland. As can happen when travelling through Ireland, he found himself in a pub talking to some of the locals. During the course of one of his conversations, he mentioned that he was on a journey to retrace some of his family heritage, and he was wondering where he might locate some Murphys. The fellow he was speaking with replied, "Murphys!" He said, "Geez fella you're walking all over them!"

Indeed we are always walking over the remnants in our world. I think in North America we're not always so aware of it because for most of us our memory is always so short and our sense of history limited. I remember the first time I visited the Holy Land and when I stood with our guide in Jaffa on the Mediterranean coastline and he mentioned how we were standing in the midst of a city that had a history that went back more than 4000 years. In that part of the world, one is reminded of the remnants because they are all around you. They are always under your feet. The remnants of countless lives lived, battles fought and civilizations and peoples that have come and gone. Most of which we have all but forgotten.

Yet sometimes the remnants are still alive and around us. Remnants of broken hearts, broken lives and broken dreams fill the world. Remnants like the homeless person who gets stepped over while in a hurry to catch the subway, or the elderly person no one visits in the nursing home, or the teen who does not fit in with the crowd at school, or the 53 year-old who has just been laid-off. Remnants are the ones who no longer belong...who are out of season...out of place.

The word, remnant as we have it in the modern English language comes from an old English word that was used to describe the fringe, or the end of a piece of drapery or cloth. Usually the piece that gets hidden or cut off from the rest. I believe that this can easily happen to people in a world where, although we find ourselves with many ways to communicate and so many choices, there are still voices, and wills and cultures that dominate. We can easily feel that somehow if we're not clued in and a part of what's going on in the news, or the latest celebrity gossip or what's trending on Twitter, or subscribing to the dominant culture that leads so many people (often blindly), it's easy to end up on the fringes...out of place...a remnant.

I know I can feel this way at time as a Christian in a society where the media has embraced the dominant ideology of secular materialism. Most people of faith these days, when inundated by mainstream media can and do find themselves on the outside looking in or maybe even looking back. Like the Israelites in Babylon...it can feel like exile...we may discover ourselves as remnants.

Except the words of the prophet Jeremiah, do not condemn the remnant. When it comes to God and when it comes to the history of God's people, remnant is not a bad word. You see, in the history of God's people and throughout the stories of scripture, God does great things with the remnants. In fact, this is one of the more important themes of the Bible. It's not what does God to affirm the majority or make sure that the strong survive. God's story is one in which the remnants are a part of the promise for the future. The opening verse of the text that Pat read for us this morning contains these words, "proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel."

This has been for thousands of years the call and the appeal of people who find themselves on the margins, for ones who have felt they have been left behind. This has always been the call of ones who realize that they cannot do it on their own. Ones who have discovered that they need God's help if they and their descendants are to ever have a future. "To be delivered from hand of those stronger than they" as the prophet Jeremiah says. This is what make God's people, God's people, because they are they ones who have not only been chosen by God, but in that choosing they themselves have chosen to allow God to lead and allow God to save. The God we learn about in the Bible is the God of the Remnants.

For the Jews, their exile...yet as ones who survived, showed forth the power of God's strength at work. Even though this was a people that had been exiled and dispersed in the land of the most powerful empire in existence at that time...the Babylonians...the remnant was not something to be discarded, or swallowed up by the dominant culture, the remnant was a sign of hope. The remnant was the sign of a people who were still willing to be led by God...by an alternative life and Spirit that promised a future for them. As the text says, "With consolations I will lead them back." And BTW, God's remnants really are remnants. As Jeremiah describes, "among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together." When

God says, remnant, God means remnant. Not just the best and the brightest, or the ones who are the fittest or the ones who can most afford it.

Yet these are ones who still must be willing to allow God to lead them. That is the initial appeal of the ones in exile, "it is the call on God to save." Yet it is not just asking God to save...it is actually letting God be in charge. A God who will guide them on the path they will take, even give them the food they will eat.

Asking God to do something and letting God do something really are two different things. This can be difficult. Asking for someone to help you or do something for you and then actually letting them do it without interfering or still wanting to be in control. It's like letting your friend drive the car, but then you find that you are always shouting directions and telling them what to do. Are you really trusting them to drive or do you still want to be in the driver's seat? Where is your hope, when you still seek that kind of control?

I believe this is one of the great challenges of faith. Yes, we may ask for God's help but are we willing to give up control and let God lead us?

The remnant in Jeremiah was at the point where they had nothing else to rely on...they had to trust. The same is true in the Christmas story and the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt. When they flee to Egypt they are remnants, refugees into exile...as ones who do not belong. But as we know they do not remain there, the time comes when through them God's Spirit was working something far greater.

This is just how it is with the God of the Remnants...who turns even the most insignificant ones into the giants of faith. We see it time and again through the history of our faith, be it a small band of disciples, fledgling churches in the first centuries, religious exiles who settled in North America fleeing persecution in Europe. Our God has always been a God of the Remnants.

You see, Christmas just isn't about celebrating the birth of Christ and saying "gee you know, it's really great you are here, glad we can have a reason celebrate, eat a few good meals and exchange gifts." It's about allowing that story...and the Spirit that infuses that story to infuse our lives and our living. It's about letting that Spirit take over and guide us in the time that is to come...especially when we feel like remnants we really are. Or when we encounter

others who have discovered that they have become remnants. The Christmas story echoes the story of so many exiles and remnants over the ages who found hope and promise and deliverance when they allowed God's Spirit to lead them. Even and especially when they had nothing else to rely on. No wealth, no land, no education, no social standing, no quick fixes, nothing...not even a future it seemed.

You see my friends, for us the remnants of Christmas in our lives should be more than the turkey soup in the freezer, the few pounds around the waist, or a tree discarded by the roadside. The remnants of Christmas and the faith it births are the stories of remnants who survived because they received a strength that was as strong as life itself. These are stories one's who have been reminded that the power of God is life...everlasting life...eternal life...another chance...a way forward...call it what you like...but it is the remnant of Christmas that matters most to each and every remnant...even us. It matters in this new year...and by the grace of God for years to come.