

**The Remnant of Israel**  
 Vespers Advent reflection  
 The Oratory church of Saint Boniface  
 Brooklyn, New York  
 13 December 2009

**But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly  
 who shall take refuge in the Lord: the *remnant* of Israel.  
 They shall do no wrong and speak no lies.  
 Nor shall be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue.  
 They shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.**  
 Zephaniah 3:12-13

The “**remnant of Israel**”: our theme, our focus, our invitation.  
 This particular notion of the people of God we find in abundance  
 in the Prophets of the Old Testament.  
 It is the book of Deuteronomy, however, which provides most of the basis  
 for the prophetic notion of “**remnant**”.  
 Deuteronomy’s influence on the prophets is significant.  
 Deuteronomy presents Israel, poised to enter the Promised Land,  
 being addressed by Moses.  
 This group is itself a kind of “**remnant**”.  
 Those with whom the Sinai covenant was originally made  
 have now been destroyed for their unbelieving apostasy  
 and this is the next generation who survived.

Formed by this great history, transmitted by Deuteronomy,  
 many of the prophets speak to us of the people of God as a remnant.

Isaiah (10:20) declares:

**In that day the *remnant* of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob,  
 will no longer rely on him who struck them down  
 but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.**

Through Jeremiah (23:3) and Micah (2:12) God speaks in the first person:  
**I myself will gather the *remnant* of my flock out of all the countries  
 where I have driven them.**

**I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob;  
 I will surely bring together the *remnant* of Israel.**

Amos (5:15) ponders:

**Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy  
on the *remnant* of Joseph.**

Ezekiel (11:13) pleads in question:

**Ah, Sovereign LORD! Will you completely destroy  
the *remnant* of Israel?**

Haggai and Zechariah also speak of the “remnant”.

And, of course, through Zephaniah (3:12-13)

God promises what we read in opening:

**But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly  
who shall take refuge in the Lord: the *remnant* of Israel.**

**They shall do no wrong and speak no lies.**

**Nor shall be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue.**

**They shall pasture and couch their flocks with none to disturb them.**

The "**remnant of Israel**".

A popular expression:

- a popular name for Jewish congregations,  
such as of the oldest congregation in New York.  
(I have not seen it; but it may be on my “to be visited” list  
the next time I come to New York!)
- a popular name for various organizations such as that based in Texas,  
dedicated to exploring and explaining the connections  
between Judaism and Catholicism.

The "**remnant of Israel**".

What does the expression really mean?

When we think remnant, we think “survivors”.

In fact, we may even think “Survivor” (!),

with each passing episode the group increasingly *remnant*.

When we think “**remnant**,

we tend to think of a select few still alive on this side of tragedy.

What *is* “**remnant**”?

What is the remnant of which Zephaniah speaks?

While we can surely understand “**remnant**” from a historical perspective,  
it behooves us to go deeper, to understand remnant of Israel metaphorically,  
which serves as a springboard to understand remnant of Israel spiritually.

Now, we can only understand remnant in the context of the covenantal relationship of God with His people. God is in relationship with a people.

Israel we believe is God's firstborn, His people.

But Israel is, in the end, at a deeper level, all those in covenantal relationship with God.

Beyond *national* Israel are those who have the *faith* of Abraham.

Indeed, there is a mysterious passage from Saint Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome, often subtitled, "**the remnant of Israel**", in which he says,

**"At the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace."** (Romans 11:4)

**"Chosen by grace."**

God calls *us* to relationship, to an intimate relationship with Himself.

It is a relationship in which He takes the initiative.

**"It was not you who loved me, but I who loved you"**

we read in the first letter of John.

And in the same passage from Romans 11, we indeed read,

**"See then Gods' kindness to you."** (v. 22)

We are the remnant, we are church, we are God's beloved, by God's gracious doing.

God weds us to Himself, if we allow Him.

If we accept and welcome

—which we must do, for love *cannot* and *will* not be forced—

then we enter into covenant, we enter into God's intimate life.

This relationship is *covenantal* because there is a promise.

God's calling, God's invitation implies a promise.

God promises unconditional love.

God promises fidelity.

God promises to be with us regardless of what occurs.

The promise was articulated in so many words

in what we heard from the prophets Jeremiah and Micah.

Israel is all those in covenantal relationship with God.

The *remnant* of Israel articulates something specific about this covenantal relationship.

Remnant implies the notion of *remaining*.

Our relationship with God is a dynamic, evolving, deepening relationship, lived as a journey, in which we are free, in which we can come and go.

And, as you may have noticed, the relationship can know challenges!

If “remnant” implies the notion of remaining in this relationship, a relationship in which God takes the initiative, then the “**remnant of Israel**” refers to God’s fidelity.

If “remnant” implies the notion of remaining in this relationship, a relationship in which we freely choose, in which we are free, then the “**remnant of Israel**” also refers to our perseverance whereby we remain.

Those who remain are

- those who choose God
- those who prefer God to the powers of the earth
- those who trust and opt for Gods’ embrace
- those who persevere

Indeed, Saint Paul adds,

**“See then Gods’ kindness to you, provided *you remain in his kindness.*”**  
(Romans 11:22)

God’s fidelity on the one hand and our perseverance on the other hand:  
the interplay between the two is mysterious.

In our freedom, we must choose.

As stated, love *cannot* and *will* not be forced.

There are times when we clearly do not choose, or choose well.

We go astray.

We act outside of the covenantal relationship.

In fact, we can become discouraged at how easily this occurs, and be left thinking that our relationship with God seems mostly, in the end, to depend on us and our perseverance—or lack thereof (!).

But if this relationship is God’s initiative, are we not able to persevere only because God is faithful?

If this relationship requires that my heart be elevated by and infused with divine love, then how is it possible to persevere without the Author of such love?

We surely must choose and we surely go astray  
and God surely respects our freedom.

Yet are we not mysteriously carried in our choosing and in our going astray  
and in our exercising free will?

Our freedom and our challenges are not illusory.  
 But are we not preceded by the One who draws us to the Mystery  
 and whose gifts—as Saint Paul says in the same passage from Romans 11—  
**“are irrevocable”**.

The promise expressed through the prophet Zephaniah, in fact, suggests this.  
**“I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly.”**  
**“I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly.”**  
**“I will leave in your midst a people *humble and lowly*.”**

The suggestion is not

**“The people will have been to hell and back and will finally be quiet.”**

The suggestion is

**“I will gather and protect those who recognize my generous doing  
 and who gratefully and trustingly yield to me.”**

**“Humble and lowly”** is not a description  
 of a people in blind degrading submission.

**“Humble and lowly”** bespeaks the spirit of poverty  
 of those to whom the kingdom of God belongs,  
 the inner disposition of those who surrender in love,  
 that God might truly be their refuge.

Advent is a time of surrender,  
 of hearing God’s call to encounter by complete surrender.  
 In surrendering we are the “remnant of Israel”,  
 a people transformed by the faithful love of God.  
 The remnant is increasingly transformed.  
 We shall do no wrong and speak no lies.  
 In our mouths a deceitful tongue shall not be found.  
 We shall pasture and couch our flocks with none to disturb them.  
 In other words, we shall be vehicles of divine light,  
 and we shall be a safe place for others,  
 for, in us, they will encounter the Lord.

Let us surrender.

It is a simple act of will.

Nothing and no one can impede us from surrendering:  
 no fear, no past hurt, no cynicism, no grievance with the Church.  
 In fact, these are all occasions to surrender.

Surrender and know peace.

Surrender and know the Prince of peace:

- Wonder-Counselor
- God-Hero
- Emmanuel, God-with-us

God is with us.

Let us rejoice.