

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
The Christmas Story is Our Story: Return and Renewal
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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2 Kings 25:8-12; Matthew 1:12-17

It was all my Peace Corps roommate could talk about. It was Bird Island this and Bird Island that. Finally, I gave in and agreed to go with him to visit Bird Island, a small uninhabited island off the larger island of Palawan in the southern Philippines. He said he had it all arranged. First, we would travel by ship to Palawan, then hire a “guide” to take us to Bird Island. It sounded like a great plan until we got to the ship that would take us to Palawan. The ship it turns out was a cargo ship that had some room for passengers and all the passenger spaces were sold out so we slept on the deck. After several very warm days we arrived in Palawan. Our “guide” to the island was the one fisherman we could hire to take us who knew where the island was. We paid him half the fare to get us there and promised him the other half when he picked us up three days later. We traveled out aboard his outrigger canoe and watched as the waves became larger and stronger. As we finally approached Bird Island, we noticed that the horizon was growing ever darker with clouds. Our “guide” dropped us off and immediately turned and ran. We came ashore with our food, sleeping mats and no tent. We walked around the island then settled in before the typhoon hit us. For the next 48 hours the rain and wind whipped us and the island. Fortunately, on the third day the storm broke. But it was then that it dawned on us that we had no way to communicate with anyone, anywhere, and what would happen if our “guide” decided not to return? Thoughts of Gilligan’s Island danced in our heads. It occurred to us that we could be castaways without food, water, or hope.

I wonder this morning how many of you have ever found yourselves feeling like a castaway? By that I don’t mean stuck on an island some place, but simply that you feel as if you are living in a new and strange place; a place where nothing seems to make sense anymore; a place where the language is filled with all sorts of terms and phrases you don’t understand; a place where the ground under your feet seems to be constantly shifting; a place where you no longer feel comfortable and at home? If you have ever found yourself in such a place, then you can understand how the people listed in our morning’s story felt. If you have ever felt this way, then the Christmas story is your story because all the names we read a few moments ago felt like castaways and they wondered if they would ever make it home. Let me explain.

We begin with Jechoniah because he is the person who links the story from 2 Kings with our genealogy in Matthew. Jechoniah was the next to last king of Judah. After resisting the Babylonians, he, along with many of the Judeans, was taken captive and deported to Babylon. His brother Zedekiah, who was 21 at the time, was tasked with ruling by Judah’s Babylonian overlords. It was only a few years later that Zedekiah chose to rebel against Babylon. This time the Babylonians were not nice. As we read, they destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple to the ground, killed Zedekiah’s sons, then blinded Zedekiah and took him away in chains to Babylon. Along with Zedekiah most of the population of Judah was taken into exile as well. In Babylon the people found themselves as castaways. It was a strange land with a strange language, strange gods, and strange customs. Like my friends and I, they wondered if anyone would ever come and take them home.

It is that sense of being castaways that permeates Matthew’s genealogy. As I mentioned, the genealogy begins with Jechoniah who, with most of Judea, is taken into exile in Babylon. It continues with his son Salathiel who grew up and stayed in Babylon. It continues with Jeconiah’s grandson Zerubbabel, who was able to lead some of God’s people back to Judah. He was able to do so because God

sent a messiah who would allow them to return. That messiah was Cyrus the Great of Persia who defeated the Babylonians. Unfortunately, Zerubbabel who is seen by several prophets as a second Messiah, is unsuccessful in restoring Judah's fortunes and disappears from the Bible altogether. The remaining names in the genealogy are unknown to us. They are names that have been lost to history. In a sense they are those forgotten on a desert island who are seemingly never rescued and pass away without ever getting to come home to the land of promise which their ancestors were promised by God. What I mean by that statement is that the Jews continued to live under a succession of empires: Persian, Greek, Egyptian, Hasmonean, and Roman. Each of these empires spoke strange languages, had strange customs, and worshiped strange gods. The plight of God's people would then seem hopeless. They would always be stranded. Yet, the genealogy does not end in despair. Instead, it ends with Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph who is the Messiah. In other words, the genealogy reminds the readers that the one who will take them home, take them to the Kingdom of God, has arrived, and is at work. It reminds them that God was always there. This is also where the Christmas story becomes our story. It reminds us that even when we feel as if we are castaways, that we are not. Christ is always present, making a home for us wherever we are.

I suppose that I could stop here and simply say a bit more about Christ's constant presence and then call it a day. Yet I believe there is a second aspect of this genealogy that we need to dwell on for a moment, and that is how we should live as castaways. In other words, if we are castaways, what ought we to do? Should we give up? Should we panic? I ask this because what is interesting about God's people in exile is that they moved quickly from focusing on how to get home, to focusing on how to be at home where they were. We know this because the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, which are about Zerubbabel's return, tell us that the people in Judea had not celebrated Passover or other festivals in generations. They had not kept the Sabbath or what we call keeping kosher. To use Biblical language, the people had not walked in the ways of God. This all changed in the exile. The people in exile in Babylon began to rediscover what it meant to be the people of God; to live like the people of God; to be faithful as the people of God. And what this renewal brought was joy. The people discovered the joy of loving God and neighbor, of celebrating God's presence and provision. This renewal did not end in Babylon but continued into the time of Jesus, where the people continued to discover the joy of being God's people. So, even when they felt like castaways, by focusing on being God's faithful people they found a home away from home; a home filled with joy..

I believe that you and I are called to do the same. We are called by the Christmas story to continue to renew our faith day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out, because in that renewal it doesn't matter whether we are stranded on a desert island or are at home in front of a roaring fire, we can find our sense of Christ's presence offering us what we need in every moment. My challenge for this week then is this, to ask ourselves, how am I renewing my faith in such a way that I can continue to find the joy God offers in Jesus Christ?