

Lent 2B
Peace, Seattle
March 1, 2015
Mark 8:31-38

OUR TRUEST IDENTITY

Nidoto Nai Yoni – “Let it not happen again.”

These words emblazoned on stone near Pritchard Park call upon everyone who reads them to remember the 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who were forced from their homes and were taken to relocation camps under the authority of Executive Order 9066.

The words on the stone recall in particular the 276 Japanese Americans from Bainbridge who shared that fate. (The anniversary of the order passed about 10 days ago, February 19.)

Japanese Internment has become a topic around our dinner table these days, thanks to Kai’s 5th grade teacher. Some of you recall that time first hand—you lived through it. I’ve heard you tell of missing classmates, of friendships lost, of communities torn apart, of not being able to say goodbye.

Mary Matsuda Gruenewald, whose family owned a 10 acre strawberry farm on Vashon, was 17 when posters appeared on telephone poles instructing all persons of Japanese ancestry to report in eight days, bringing only the belongings they could carry.

She has vivid memories of grim-faced soldiers carrying rifles with bayonets watching her every move. And how, in an attempt to avoid trouble, her Japanese-immigrant parents, took all their precious Japanese mementos—family photos, phonograph records, books, even ceremonial dolls, and fed them piece by piece into the oil stove that heated their home.¹

“We didn’t want to look even faintly sympathetic to Japan, the country responsible for the Pearl Harbor devastation,” Mary said. On the inside they were loyal and patriotic. But what Mary and her family could not do was change their outward identity.

Japanese Americans on Bainbridge were some of the first to be placed in internment camps, but the strong relationships that had been cultivated over the years between neighbors translated into significant community support for their plight. It was, in part, because of this goodwill that more than half of the exiles returned to the island after the war, a greater percentage than in any other community.²

But such goodwill was, unfortunately, the exception rather than the rule.

When exiles were allowed to return beginning in December 1944, most of them remained in the camps a whole other year because of dangerous anti-Japanese sentiment in their hometowns.³

In Hood River, Oregon, newspapers published a petition signed by many local residents declaring that the Japanese should not return to the valley. And the Hood River American Legion removed the names of sixteen Japanese American servicemen from the local honor role.⁴

¹ <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/carrying-the-pain-for-70-years-japanese-americans-internment/>

² <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/wall-honors-bainbridge-japanese-americans-sent-to-internment-camps/>

³ A few of our region’s politicians, including Senator Warren Magnuson and Oregon Congressman Walter Pierce, called for tough restrictions against Japanese Americans when they began to return from the relocation centers. http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/narratives/subtopic.cfm?subtopic_ID=119

⁴ http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/narratives/subtopic.cfm?subtopic_ID=119

A colleague of mine who once served a Lutheran congregation in Hood River told me the issue was still a sensitive one decades after the war. Roger had heard many stories about what happened to the property that Japanese people left behind.

- Some folks cared for the land of their Japanese neighbors and returned it to them after the war.
- But many others, he learned, took advantage of their neighbors while they were in the camps.

It was likely, he said, that some in his congregation had signed the petition asking the Japanese not to return; but he never asked, because he didn't want to know.

Our texts this morning circle around the theme of IDENTITY.

WHO GOD IS. WHO JESUS IS. WHO WE ARE. WHAT'S OUR RELATIONSHIP.

When Uncle Sam looked at Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor, all he saw was a potential traitor. He only looked skin deep.

How deep do you look when you encounter someone? What do you see and what do you not see? What gets in the way?

When Abraham and Sarah looked in the mirror, they saw two over-the-hill seniors with a foreclosed future. But God looked deeper. God told them what he saw, and kept telling them.

It took a while for them to catch on. More than once they found themselves laughing in the face of God's ridiculous promise of a child, but finally the promise came true; their son was born. His name? "Laughter" of course.

When Jesus asked his companions who they saw when they looked at him, Peter answered, I SEE THE MESSIAH! The one sent to crush the Romans and usher in a new golden age for God's people.

But Peter doesn't see the whole picture; he can't grasp that the road God's Anointed One must travel will lead to suffering, rejection, and death, before the rising.

IF ANY WANT TO FOLLOW ME, says Jesus,
LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES AND TAKE UP THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.
THOSE WHO WANT TO SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT,
AND THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE AND FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL,
WILL SAVE IT.

This is the great conundrum of the gospel that didn't pencil out for Peter and, truth be told, doesn't for us either—

...That the very one who calls us to follow him even to death goes ahead of us to defeat that death—and does so not by side-stepping it, not through special effects or slight of hand, but by entering into it fully.

And having been plunged into its deepest darkness, is raised by God on the third day.

Twenty-one Coptic Christians took that road to the cross recently. Yesterday I read an article about the brother of two of the men who were martyred. His name is Beshir Kamel. Kamel thanked ISIS for not deleting the TESTIMONY his brothers' made to their faith in the video that captured their murder.

“[They were] a badge of honor to Christianity,” the grief-stricken man said of his brothers. “Since the Roman era, Christians have been martyred and have learned to handle everything that comes our way. This only makes us stronger in our faith because the Bible told us to love our enemies and bless those who curse us.”⁵

This past week we've been hearing about Methodist missionary Phyllis Sortor who was kidnapped from the school where she works in Central Nigeria, and is being held for ransom.⁶ We'll be praying for her safe return later in the service.

Those who know Phyllis call her courageous, tenacious and passionate about helping the Nigerian people. We don't know how the story of her captivity is going to end, but because she is bound to Christ, we know how her larger story will end. What ever unfolds for this courageous servant of God in the coming days, the end of her story is resurrection.

The journey we're on in Lent is a journey to the core of who we are—not who we are in the eyes of others who look at us, or even in our own eyes—but in God's eyes. And in God's eyes, you dear sister, dear brother, in God's eyes you are infinitely valued; infinitely loved; and worth dying for.

That's a promise. And every time we baptize in this place we get to see that promise come true...we get to see what God sees—a sister or brother sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. A person of promise who has a place forever in the heart of God.

“Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” writes St. Paul. “We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we, too, might live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”⁷

Some identities we accrue through the course of our lives misrepresent who, at our core, we truly are. Some identities that get put upon us by others—and even ourselves—may be worth giving up.

But not this one. For this identity we receive in baptism trumps all the rest.

And through the power and presence of the Spirit it coaxes us away from those half-true selves and leads us toward that place where we can become fully convinced that God is able to accomplish what God has promised. For us and for all.

Amen.

⁵ Read more at <http://www.inquisitr.com/1863053/brother-of-two-murdered-coptic-christians-thanks-isis-for-including-their-religious-comments-in-clip-video/#9cjowCC9dWAmgRE2.99>

⁶ Article by Phuong Le, AP <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/us-church-missionary-kidnapped-nigerian-compound-29188966>

⁷ Romans 6:3-5