Tonight’s Old Testament reading is really long and so you would think that there would be no reason to provide background information, but you would be wrong. The book of Ezra along with the Book of Nehemiah deal with the return of the Jewish people from exile in Persia and the subsequent rebuilding of the temple and the walls in Jerusalem. If you want a little trivia, and who doesn’t, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book and were first separated by Origin and Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

The events that we read about tonight take place somewhere between the completion of the temple and the rebuilding of the walls. We join the story tonight with a complaint being issued by the leaders in the community to Ezra about the three principal groups in Israel -- the laity, the priests, and the Levites— and how they had not separated themselves from “the peoples of the lands.” In practicality what this most likely meant was that they were still worshiping some extra gods and doing a few things of the type that get rock stars into the tabloids. Or put another way they were not acting like good Jews and probably not even acting like good humans. Ezra, naturally enough, is not happy about this and much of the rest of the reading is Ezra’s prayer. It starts with a recitation of the sins of the Jewish people in the past and then switches to the goodness of God and how he still took care of them despite their rather spotty history. And it is in this moment where Ezra says this, “But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery.” The interesting word here is remnant. The New Interpreter’s Commentary explains it this way saying, “The word ‘remnant’ can refer to the survivors of a disaster whose small numbers serve as grim evidence of the severity of the disaster (as in Amos 3:12), or, more positively, it can refer, as here, to a small community that has been delivered and that is the down payment on a greater future to come.” As you might imagine this image of a remnant has been popular with people who live in turbulent times. The idea is that as the world around has gone mad there is a group that maintains its identity, that remains worshipers of the true God. And so the question I want to pose for us tonight is are we a remnant? Meaning do we live in times where the world has forgotten God and are we the down payment for a future to come or is that simply hyperbole?

Well…let’s look at some facts. A recent headline from the Pew Research Center read, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” To support this the article stated, “In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular,’ now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.” In a secularizing country are we a remnant just by the fact that we have shown up for church on s Saturday night in November? Ross Douthat in the New York Times offers a slightly different analysis of the data saying, “The recent decline of institutional religion is entirely a function of the formerly weakly affiliated ceasing to identify with religious bodies entirely; for the strongly affiliated (just over a third of the American population), the trend between 1990 and the present is a flat line, their numbers neither growing nor collapsing but holding steady across an era of supposedly dramatic religious change.” What he is saying is that those who show up in church has stayed about the same. It’s just that the stigma of not going to church has greatly shrunk so people who used to say they were Christian now are confortable to say that they really don’t care. Which I guess means that if we are a remnant we have been one for quite sometime. But whatever the actual case may be the important thing for us in terms of behavior and belief is, in the words of Matthew Richard Schlimm, to be, “distinct from the rest of society, set apart for God’s purposes, no matter how unpopular it may be.” How we want to view our status does not change what we are to be about. We are to show the world a different way of living a way that not only loves one another but also calls us to grow more like God. Our goal in life is really to be Holy, which of course means to be set apart. And this holiness for which we are called I think may be best summed up in the prayer attributed to St. Francis which says:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, joy.

And in the words of Jean Luc Picard may we “make it so.”