

FOUNDATIONS

The Iban people of Borneo live in longhouses on stilts in the middle of the rainforest. They travel by river in dugout canoes because the jungle around them is nearly impenetrable. They live in nearly Stone Age conditions, fishing and hunting with poison darts from blow guns. And they have no written language. But they have history. In every longhouse is a long pole on which is carved concentric rings - each one representing a generation. Every ring is carved according to a symbolic code that allows those who know the code to identify a story connected to that ring. In the sweltering evenings, the elders take down the pole, read the rings with their fingers, and tell the gathered clan the stories of their ancestors.

By and large, we've lost this connection with our past. Perhaps it's the American melting pot, the mingling of stories from all over the world. We're woven of so many threads we don't know where to start. I have a cousin who has reclaimed his Scottish heritage to the point that he plays bagpipes - except when he's claiming his Cherokee heritage at a tribal gathering. Or maybe it's just that we've become so individualistic, so imbued with the American dream of succeeding by our own efforts without depending on anyone else, that we no longer think about such dusty old things as ancestors.

We should. Nobody exists independent of context. Yes, we are free to improvise our own way up to a point, but our past - including decisions made by ancestors long ago - are the stage scenery against which we act. Our ancestors' good and strong decisions are the foundations on which we stand, the opportunities that we are given. And their mistakes are the burdens we bear and the challenges that we seek to overcome. The Iban people know this.

So did the Jews. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah or the Pentateuch) are the foundational stories of both the Jewish and Christian faiths. In the tales of ancestors - Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Leah and Rachel - we see flashes of powerful faith to inspire us and depressing stories of scheming sneaks to humble us. In the story of Moses and the people of Israel, we find both courage and frailty, righteousness and rebellion.

These stories - especially the story of the Exodus from Egypt - are the foundation of the rest of the Old Testament. Indeed, the Exodus story is told and retold numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, in many different ways. The Psalms remember the Exodus story as a time when God saved the people from their enemies and led them through hardship. The prophets Hosea and Jeremiah remember the Exodus as a honeymoon, a brief time when Israel still kept covenant with God. The prophet Ezekiel remembers the Exodus as a time when hard-headed Israel rebelled against God repeatedly. Every writer remembered the story differently - but they all recalled the same story.

In July and August, so will we. Beginning with creation and working our way through the the Exodus, we will simply hear together the foundational story of the Torah, because if we follow Christ, then this story is ours as well. It is our genesis, our deliverance, our protection. Our foundation.