

Sermon March 27 2022 4th Lent
Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 15:11-32:

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Joshua 5:9-12:

The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.’ And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

SERMON: “As Forward We Travel” The Rev. Brent Damrow

On that first morning, I wonder what did they feel? Was it wonder or fear? Was it amazement or worry? Was it gratitude or anxiety? Or maybe something altogether different and maybe even undefinable? On that first morning, after the final vestige of the old normal had run out, slipped through their fingers, after the remaining food that this group of Israelites had brought out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and beyond the grasp of even the Pharaoh, the food that had been grown and stored, those spices that had been held and cherished – all of it. When all of that ran out, I wonder on that first morning, that first morning that manna fell from the skies – no, not in the reading today, but in the way back at the beginning of the exodus. Not on this day, but 40 years before. I wonder as people peeked out of their tents that morning, when they had no idea what they would expect, what they felt when they saw the ground covered, not with strawberry plants glistening red with dew, or beans so plump they begged to be picked, or tomatoes bright and orange, their weight sagging on the vine, but instead small flakes of something that littered the ground, almost like that snow that you see outside our window today. I do hope this. I hope that on that first morning the people in the wilderness felt different about what fell from the sky that day than what I do about what’s going on outside right now.

I wonder how it tasted. And whether over those 40 years of the same manna every single day, I wonder if there ever was a new flavor. Or instead, maybe deeper and better, each day when they gathered up that small white flakey substance, it taught them the real meaning of being provided for. It taught them the real sense of gratitude, of blessing, that every morning that they saw that white stuff drifting down over the ground that they knew to the core of their being that they were once again remembered by God. And I wonder if for them that was enough.

Forty years of doing that, day after day after day, I wonder how new habits formed even as old habits fell away. Which, quite frankly, we must do when the norms we hold dissipate, too. As I thought about it this week, I wondered about those whose job it was to provide the food before they left for the wilderness, those who toiled from sunup to sundown, doing things like planting and growing, harvesting and baking, producing and serving. I wonder if they found blessing in the new truth that they no longer had nearly as much of that kind of work to do. That maybe in the midst when things are taken away from us -- I don’t know if you can relate to this – but we discover new blessings in the simplicity of life. I wonder if those who had devoted their whole waking hours to the production of food found new ways to spend their time, whether in simple things like sitting with their children, or gathering in small groups to talk about the blessings and challenges of life. Maybe time to devote to simple pleasures, like pottery or artwork. Maybe they found, actually, the time to meditate about what was important, to pray and connect with God. I wonder if they found blessings in that new simplicity, or I wonder if they felt a loss of their identity, their purpose, and maybe they hadn’t found a new one yet. And I wonder if those who had never been part of making food for their families found great joy in simply going out and picking that stuff up and bringing it on home.

I wonder as they walked out each morning to gather what they needed for the day – because remember with the manna that’s all you needed for the day. And quite frankly, that’s all you dared pick, because what happened to any leftover manna the next morning? It was rotten, it was spoiled, it stank to the high heavens.

And so I wonder what rituals, what liturgies, what rhythms, what songs, what prayers, what dreams accompanied them in their work. For, you see, this moment told in Joshua, this moment when all of that stopped is a pivotal moment. For 40 years, the Israelites had learned to cope with this journey through the wilderness. They had developed new norms, even if they were limited. For 40 years, they had made peace with the demands of what it meant to get up, gather their food, pack up and head out, without knowing where the road was going, but always trying to strive after God because they knew that she would show them the right way, even if they had no idea where that road was going. For 40 years, each day unfolded very much like the last. And I wonder if they had found security or boredom, whether they had found new meaning or whether they had unlocked new yearnings.

One of the things we do know by this time, though, is that the people had long since stopped wishing to go back to Egypt, to the norm that they knew. Do you remember when they set out? Virtually every day they said take us back. At least we knew we had something to eat. Take us back. At least we knew what life was like. Take us back. Just take us back to Egypt! Even though it meant enslavement. And by this time in the story – it has been chapters even – since the people have issued that kind of complaint. They finally let go of wanting to go back to their old normal. Have we?

On this day in the book of Joshua, the people have already entered the Promised Land. Do you know how they got there? Guess what the River Jordan did? It talked to the Red Sea, and it parted, too. Memories of stories I'm sure these people had only heard of, because do you remember, not a single person crossed into the Promised Land who had left Egypt. And so when those waters parted, none of them remembered what it was like to have the waters parted at the Red Sea. But all of them had heard that story so many times that I bet the kids said please daddy, a new story tonight? Please mommy, can we talk about something else, as cool as that is?

And so they cross over into the Promised Land, and they build a place of remembrance and thanksgiving. They had at least physically arrived. And on this morning when they got up to do what had become normal, God told them – and in this translation it said God had rolled away the disgrace of Egypt. In other translations it said God had rolled away the stone of disgrace. Any other stones that are coming up that are about to get rolled away? Maybe, if we let them?

So God told them that she had rolled away that stone from their fear of the Pharaoh, from the wilderness, from a lack of a place to call home, on this morning when they were about to lose another normal, they had no idea what to expect. And I wonder how they felt.

I wonder if they were still clinging to the stories told by their parents and their parents' parents about this thing called planting and growing and harvesting and feasting. Yes, gathering to feast, to celebrate. Can you imagine? To sit and linger in the joyful company of one another. Because, remember, there was not a single person among them who had ever tasted anything other than manna and quail. There was not a single person among them who had ever imagined what life could be.

I wonder whether old norms of who was supposed to do what and why still clung to the people of Israel. Or whether they had journeyed long enough to find deeper truth, broader welcome, more inclusive definitions of what is needed by community. I wonder if by this point by seeing different people out and gathering, by seeing different people leading, by seeing the different gifts that had to have flourished in 40 years in a trying place, whether they were ready to accept that new definitions of who could lead and why were available, of accepting new definitions of who was called to serve and why were available. For that, I believe, was the gift that was available to them in this new beginning, and I think is available to us now. And I want to tell you that there's every reason to believe that they had in fact learned. I don't know if you remember, but in this journey in the wilderness they finally remembered stories that had been told them that they had a God. And that they together were a people. Starting there never hurts.

During this journey through the wilderness, they had been given the Ten Commandments, all those commandments about how to love God specifically, and how to love neighbor. And they were trying, even if they didn't always get it right. I don't know if you remember, but in this whole idea of planting and harvesting, it was encoded in the new law and the new way of living that when you planted that whole field, you didn't harvest to the edges. You remembered that other people were hungry, that other people needed to come and, like that manna, just glean whatever they could from that field, because sometimes it's enough to be grateful. Within the new law, if you remember what they learned along the way, they were not supposed to shun the alien or outsider. They were not supposed to quibble about who was welcome or not. In fact, they were supposed to welcome the alien and refugee, because they too had been alien in Egypt, and on this journey they should remember exactly how hard it is to find your way to a new land.

The book of Joshua, in many ways in the Old Testament, is a book of the people getting it as right as they ever did. And if you read the book of Joshua, you know that they didn't get it all right. There are terrible things that unfolded in the new land. And yet, they continued to move forward.

I wonder, as we stand at this moment in our new beginning, whether we have spent enough time. It's only been two years, and – knock on wood – not 38 more. Whether we've had enough time yet to let go of the old normal and its limitations. Although I worry, because I hear about companies who rushed to offer at-home work for people when it benefitted them, take it away from the very people who are disabled or who in other ways need it to continue working. I wonder if we have learned enough.

I wonder as we enter into this new time of opportunity whether we have redefined leadership and servanthood enough. I wonder if we are ready to let new leaders step forward, a new generation step forward, whether they look like us, act like us, love like us, or even were born in the place where we were born. I wonder if we've discovered enough in our own lives to know whether or not we have new callings, and to let go of old identities that served a purpose, even if they no longer do.

A friend and I had a wonderful chance this morning to catch up over my sabbatical and over new possibilities. Throughout that conversation was woven this idea of what do we let go of as we

move into a new thing. What hurts do we let go of? What identities do we let go of in order to claim new possibilities?

Here's what I think the people in that story can tell us today. Do you know what happened just before they crossed the river? It was something that hadn't happened since leaving Egypt. Every single one of the men were circumcised. Circumcision as the sign of covenant with God, a sign of cutting a covenant with God, of being in relationship. Before they came into this new land, they remembered that relationship. What would it look like for us? Remember, Jeremiah says that that covenant has now been written on our hearts. As we move into this new time, we must remember that covenant written on our hearts.

The second thing in this reading today is that they celebrated the Passover. They remembered the story of their deliverance. Will we remember the story of our deliverance, of how God does deliver, how God offers new beginnings always. Will we be ready in a few weeks when God rolls away the stone, the stone of death itself. Will we be ready to go out into that world? Will we be ready to remember the covenant? Will we be ready to remember our calling? Will we be ready to let go of anything that gets in the way of simply being God's community of faithfulness, love and service? And are we ready for a world that may look very different from the one we left? The Israelites were. And you know what? It gave them a whole new blessed beginning. And then, they made mistakes again. And then they needed God's sheltering arms out again. It's the way of life and faith.

What happens after this story is that when they settled in the new land, they sat down and they feasted, and they gave thanks to God. May we do the same. Amen.