

"Stepping Up to the Plate"

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Joshua 5: 9 - 12

Luke 15: 1 - 3; 11b - 32

The Scripture readings for today are about change, transformation, shedding old skins and stepping out in new directions.

Joshua, if you recall, was the man, anointed by God to take over for Moses as the leader of the rag-tag band of Hebrews who had been wandering in the Sinai for some 40 years seeking the land of milk and honey promised to them by God.

As we pick up the story today, they have made that fateful crossing of the Jordan River whose waters rolled back as the priests carried the Ark of the Covenant and the people followed to settle in Canaan.

Just a word about the Jordan River; in Joshua chapter 3(15), it was noted that where they crossed was near Jericho at its widest expanse and the waters, swollen by spring floods, were the most turbulent. So while not quite as dramatic as crossing the Reed Sea pursued by the Egyptian army, the authors of this Scripture wanted us to know that God again intervened for the Hebrews' sake.

That was such a dramatic scene of God-on-our-side. Don't we wish we could have similar signs for our own lives? We probably do have them, but we don't always recognize them; instead of torrents, we may get thimbles' full—a little bit can go a long way.

People did not live much past 35 in those days so few of those who escaped from Egypt survived to the Promised Land. It was their children and grandchildren who made it.

The opening verse (9) is a declaration of freedom that the old has passed awayⁱ (slavery and wandering) and that a new life is to begin.

This celebration, literally the first Passover in their new home, happened 500 years after the migration to Egypt. Passover, this most important meal in the Jewish liturgical year was made up of foodstuffs from the land. At that moment, the manna—the dough-like substance they had been living on for years--ceased to be available as were the quails God also had sent.

It was as if now that they had arrived at their destination, God decided that they should get off the divine dole and start raising their own food.

Let's stop a minute. What do we really know about these people, these Hebrews? For one thing, we know that the Jewish religion did not start until they received the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses; the Torah, their holy Scripture consists of the first five books of The First Testament, and they are known as the books of Moses.

Although attributed to Moses, he did not write all of the Torah; in fact, the Levitic priests and others wrote some portions centuries later. We think of the commandments as being ten in number; in the Torah there are actually 613 commandments—some so petty that you know Moses could not have been their author. Moses was a man of big ideas; pettiness was the purview of the priests.

I have to confess that there is a disturbing element in the Joshua tale. What happened to the people who grew the crops that the Israelites ate for their first Passover in the Promised Land? Were they like the Indians in our early days who simply were pushed out as an endless stream of settlers took their land? Food for thought.

The juxtaposition of famine in both tales is interesting, I think; it was "famine" that drove many peoples from all over the Middle East to Egypt and while life was good when Joseph was a powerful man in Egypt, they eventually became slaves who would later follow Moses to start new lives, and it was "famine" that forced the prodigal son to go home.

Let's turn now to the familiar story of the Prodigal Son in the gospel of Luke. "Prodigal" is an odd word; I had thought of it initially as a positive thing probably because it sounds similar to prodigy--a really talented kid; but prodigal is quite different; it is a pejorative--meaning "wasteful, lavish, proud, conceited."

The story is simple enough—the younger son, who doesn't stand to gain much of an inheritance by waiting until his father dies, asks for his portion and then takes off to have fun and games in the big city.

He is not good at planning ahead, and he falls into the illusion-trap that the good life can go on and on—"I'm so lucky, just one more roll of the dice and I'll be rich again... These women love me for who I am not just my money etc." And then, of course, came the famine.

The order of inheritance in Israeli society was through the sons with the oldest son gaining the lion's share of the assets; there may not have been much left for the other sons. The daughters had to rely on the generosity of their brothers.

I wonder who each of us identifies with in this story? The Pharisees who complain that Jesus is eating with a group of people they disapprove of? Been there, done that.

The younger son who sees no future for himself in just hanging around, working for his keep and eventually marrying, having a family and continuing to work for his brother and someday maybe inheriting the whole spread?

Why not just take what is due him, blow off the family and have a great time: "They don't even know I'm alive; I can be my own man; I'll show them."

How many teenagers run away from their families, seeking a happier, more exciting life? We read about them everyday. As parents, are we ever in denial about our children, especially teenagers; we've given them our values and have confidence that their heads will not be turned. Been there, done that.

When Sue and I lived in St Louis, a preteen African American boy had been shot in the back and killed because he ran away from the police who wanted to ask him some questions. Protesters were picketing a house near us that belonged to the chief of police.

We went down to see what was happening and a neighbor of his came out with his young daughter and scolded the protesters—"if you raised your children right, they wouldn't act like that. My daughter would never run away from the police." Yeah, right.

As if that man had some secret potion that would keep his child from straying when she got older. Denial is a very short-lived, temporarily comforting state of being.

It sounds as if the younger son in the story had no one with whom to share his concerns.

The attitude of the older brother doesn't seem much better, does it? He seems not to understand that working on the land with his father is a good thing, something to be enjoyed instead of wallowing in jealousy. It almost sounds as if he regretted not going off just as his younger brother had done.

And what about the father; is he just too good to be true? He was so very understanding; the model of infinite patience. Of course, we can't go mixing idealized family life today with idealized family life of two millennia ago when fathers were the CEOs of family, business and religion. No Brady bunch there.

Of course, we can look at this parable in several ways. I think we tend to forget the set up in the Scripture. The parable is one response to the Pharisees question about why Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors—the lowest of the low.

Occasionally, Jesus explains the meaning of his parables to his disciples but often we are left to decide for ourselves just what he was getting at.

To my way of thinking, the older brother's attitude of resentment toward the prodigal, probably represented the Pharisee's attitude toward tax collectors, most of whom collected more taxes than were due and pocketed the difference.

The irony here is that cheating the poor through excessive temple taxes was routine for many priests but ignored by other Pharisees. Jesus was well aware of this double standard.

The understanding parent who is quick to forgive and points out that the son is always welcome is thought to be God; Jesus is telling all who can hear that repentance is the first step and that forgiveness follows immediately.

The young son admitted first to himself and then to his parent that he had been selfish and wrong; he did not ask to be given again what he had thrown away but simply to be allowed to work to survive.

While the son would enjoy the welcome home party—there was no promise that life for him would go back to what it was. He squandered his inheritance; he would have to build it up again.

The gift of the parent was more important than material wealth; it was forgiveness and unabashed love.

So how do we relate these ancient stories to our lives today? The story of the Israelites is long and arduous, filled with hardships. This first Passover in the Promised Land was a chance to feel good about what they had accomplished—freedom from slavery, a God that made good on promises, and a covenant with God to keep them safe and well.

Today we are living under a new covenant with God that as Jesus said in the last supper is sealed in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. The road we have chosen to follow-- the teaching of Jesus--is not an easy one just as the road the Jews followed was not easy.

And as the prodigal son learned, the cost of the precious prize at the end of the road is forgiveness and love through repentance—recognizing the ill thoughts and deeds of one's past, admitting the errors and trying to do better.

It is not easy to keep our focus on what Jesus wants from us--to love God and to help our neighbor, but that is our mandate. Like the Jews at Canaan and like the characters in the parable and all the disciples throughout the ages, the choice is always ours.

Amen

ⁱ Charles B. Cousar et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C*, (1994), Knoxville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 221.