

Made New by Returning—Fourth Sunday in Lent

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[Joshua 5:9-12](#)

[Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

There might be no other part of the Bible—or selection from Christ's teaching in the New Testament—that is more well known than this parable about the so-called Prodigal Son. This story that Jesus tells, this picture that Jesus paints, encapsulates so much about who God is. The younger son is called "prodigal," of course, because he is a spendthrift, wasting his inheritance on a way of life that doesn't sustain him for long.

And many preachers in the history of our tradition have also called the father "prodigal" as well. They note how generous and countercultural he is, in the first place by relinquishing half his estate to his son early (which, in case you were wondering, was completely unheard of). And secondly by his lavish welcoming of the shamed and unclean son *back*, with robes, and rings, and parties.

There is so much to say about this story, and there is so much that *has been said before*. So, today, let's take this tiny selection from the book of Joshua as our guide, as our lens, for how to look at Luke's Gospel.

As the folks in our Cross-Generation class are very familiar with: the story that the book of Joshua is a part of goes like this: God promised a distant, distant ancestor, (whose name Abram itself is "Blessed Ancestor") God promised him a place to live. And in the course of God's people getting to this place, many things happen: many things go wrong, and many things go gracefully right. Barren women give birth, but other children are killed and stolen. A people make a name for themselves and prosper, and those people then are enslaved in Egypt. God sends a deliverer to people—Moses, of course.

And as the story goes along by signs and wonders and power God liberates these people—these descendants of the "Blessed Ancestor"—and they are set on the path toward the land of promise, this place they believe is theirs to live in. Now, before they get there, other things happen. They are given a very strict and specific code to live by, a code and law that shows the world how special they and their God is. And on their way in a barren wilderness, they are fed by God, given miraculous food that supports them from day to day called "manna."

But in this barren land, having been liberated, eating nothing but manna—just like their ancestor Abram, these people get squirrely. They balk at both Moses and God, they lose trust, they don't believe God's word is true. And so, as the story goes, God says, "Well, boo! Since you are so ungrateful, and so untrusting, even though you literally saw me do amazing things with your own eyes, I will try again, and form a people out of your children... and not this generation."

God says, through Moses of course, "All of you here now, that knew Egypt and escaped, are sentenced to wandering together for 40 years." Which is to say, remaining place-less until all those from the former generation are buried, and their kids are grown up.

Now, time goes on, and this comes to pass. Moses too, for better or worse, is not permitted to enter the place promised to Abram. He passes away on the wilderness side of the Jordan. Joshua, his successor, leads the people miraculously across the river Jordan, just as Moses led them through the Sea in Egypt, and they settle in the land.

Here we have the context for our *tiny* passage from Joshua this morning. A new people. A new congregation, formed and forged by God, free from the weight of being enslaved, and free also from ingratitude and mistrust. This new people keep alive the tradition, remembering God's liberating power, which is what the Passover meal is about.

But this people, however, eat the stuff of the Promised place. They don't need miracle food from heaven, because they are in the miracle land, they are, according to the stories of their ancestors, in the place they belong. They are a new creation, in the arms of the land. A people once dead, are now embraced by God.

I hope this sounds a little familiar—a little bit like Jesus' parable in Luke today. Because it is the same story. It is the same people, telling the same story, about the same God. God is very consistent, in fact, we believe God doesn't change. God's people are very consistent too, consistently inconsistent... We want what we want in a hurry. Abram wanted the promise in a hurry. The Hebrew people in the wilderness wanted to get there in a hurry. The younger son, in the parable, wanted his inheritance in a hurry. But we, like they, are just children who blindly want. We have no idea what we need.

It seems today the Holy Spirit is saying: In the going, in the wanting, in the mistake-making, in the returning, and in the forgiving, we are made into something new.

It's not an accident in Jesus' parable that the word "dead" is said twice: First the father says: "...this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And then a servant says, "...this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." I think we need to leave aside the specific stuff about the son's behavior, that he went to Las

Vegas or whatever. Just like we can easily leave aside the specific stuff about the Hebrew people in the wilderness, and still know they are an image for us.

I know that you are all upstanding folk. You all probably identify with the older brother here, who is really bent out of shape about his father being a softy. But Jesus is teaching us today, that the road of faith, a life in relationship with God, will lead you to certain spiritual places that feel like dead ends. Like a wilderness for 40 years. Like a pig-pen far from home. (You fill in the blank for yourself.) And Jesus says, when you get there, your job is not to fix it, not to figure out a trick to escape by your own power. There, you must be capable of admitting defeat. Along with the wilderness people, along with the hog-feeding down-and-out-younger-son.

It seems that the key to God's promise, God's love, God's life—is our own letting go. In the wilderness the people died, to allow a new generation to come. In that pig-pen, the younger son died—to *himself*. And as we together believe, as we have seen time and again, with church mergers or unlikely 2nd half of life marriages... with hard grief or years and years of trial and hardship... and with prodigal sons and with God's own Son—from death, we trust, there will always come new life.

Amen.