

March 30, Fourth Sunday in Lent 9:30 am Worship in Chapel

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“The Morning Without Manna”

April 1, Tuesday 7 pm on Zoom

Session Five “How Do People Change?” Leader: Holton Falk

It’s an engaging question, don’t you think? “How do people change?” I hope that you will take an hour on Tuesday to join the Lenten study led by Holton. The link and electronic version of the class outline will be sent to you on Tuesday from Linda E in the church office. Paper copies of the class outline are available this morning for you to take home. In addition, there are 30 minute podcasts associated with each Lenten lesson featuring discussions with people living out these matters.

The lectionary readings today begin with Joshua on the verge of entering Canaan to conquer the land promised to the Children of Israel. Apparently, because of their unbelief, not a single member of the generation which came out of Egypt forty years before will go in to the promised land. (Josh 5:2-12) This is sobering for any mature adult. The next generation will go ahead into the fullness of God’s blessing in a way we can’t.

The Israelites have paused to circumcise each male member, and to celebrate the Passover, the mark of the covenant and the remembrance of deliverance which, with the observance of the Sabbath, are still practiced by the Jewish community anywhere in the world.

The text says that the reproach of Egypt will be rolled aside. To have a reproach rolled away is a lovely hope, so we’re listening, but to be honest, we don’t know exactly what the writer intended. Some think it refers to the Egyptian scorn for uncircumcised Israelites, some to the humiliation of bondage, some to the lack of faith of the wilderness generation. The root of the word Gilgah is from “roll” so the passage could simply be explaining the name.

In any case, it’s a transition, something ending and something new beginning. The day after the Passover, the manna that sustained the Children of Israel will cease. Miraculous provision from unknown sources will end and the people will eat what they have planted, nurtured, weeded, watered, pruned, harvested, preserved, cooked and prepared.

This is such a striking moment for the people, I want to make this the central text for our reflection this morning after looking briefly at the other texts.

Psalm 32 starts with declaration of transgression, sin, iniquity, deceit and guilt, moves to confession, then forgiveness. The movement continues from forgiveness to being hidden from enemies, preservation, deliverance. Being delivered from trouble, the believer is promised instruction, teaching, counsel, and understanding. Finally, the trusting person rests in God's steadfast love, and rejoices with others of upright heart. This is the same process that the Children of Israel are being led through.

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21, coming after statements of judgment motivated by love, claims a new creation in Christ for those who trust Christ. No longer will Paul see Christ *kata sarka*, in the flesh. As we don't think that Paul knew Christ in the flesh, before his death, we think Paul is moving from seeing Christ from a human perspective to a divine or eternal or spiritual perspective. Now, having changed our relationship with Christ, we are to be the catalyst for the reconciliation of the world with Christ. God doesn't need to change; we and the world need to be adjusted to God. This is one of those Pauline passages that are very wonderful and moving, but the more time you spend looking in to it the less clear it is. But we get the point. And this may be a hint that the transformation of the people of Israel in Joshua is meant to be a step in the transformation of the whole world.

The Parable of the Rebellious Son and the Resentful Son. This is so striking for us that it is a real story, not a parable. The old life and the new life. Repentance, return, rejoicing, resistance, rethinking God's generosity, invitation to rejoice in God's constant presence and full gifts.

I'd like to direct our attention to the process of being dragged away from bondage, grumbling and remembering how things were better back when.

I'd like to remember with you all the times when we literally didn't know:
 where our rent or next meal or children's needs were coming from,
 where we would find the strength to go on,
 how we would be able to forgive someone whose carelessness or malice denied us the fulfillment of a dream,
 what to think about our faith, or the Bible, or the Christian church.
 And during those times, we experienced the presence of God and miraculous provision.

I'd like to acknowledge what it's like to see the world as we knew it change before our eyes, and be uncertain what is coming next. The community of Joshua was no longer going to be cared for through a daily miracle of provision. Instead, the community was going to receive the miraculous gift of will to live, will to work, and strength for the tasks ahead.

Which morning do you think is the more formidable challenge? The last night of addiction or the first morning without the substance we've depended on? Addiction recovery is a challenge, a thing with structure and resources and timeline. It is hellish. But if we could face the difficult relationships and circumstances of life, we would not have reached for something to get us through. We were looking for an easier way, not a harder way. We wanted to dodge the pain and partiality, the uncertainty and the incompleteness of daily life. We wanted immediate relief and justice, not a righteous life with uncertain outcome and complexity.

To step up and take our own place in the world is so hard, very few of us do.

There's denial and deflection. Hiding behind blame for others, shrivelling away from using our gifts due to shame, dodging interesting challenges, demanding success to be unqualified, refusing to examine or re-evaluate what we are doing, defending and explaining instead of listening to other perspectives.

There's waiting for another miracle, when the miracle has already been given--being alive and having the gifts and resources available to step out.

The manna was God's miraculous provision during a certain period of need and transition.

The land of Israel was God's miraculous provision for a nation learning to trust God and each other.

The promise to Abraham of the land of Canaan sounds nice. Four generations plus 70 years of servitude later, a land of their own to cultivate and harvest was provision.

Before we move one, we must acknowledge that the book of Joshua, which records the command to completely exterminate the people already living in that land, is very difficult to reconcile with Christ, the fullest expression of God's self. This very day, the extermination of those living in Canaan who are not Israelites is advocated as God's will and practical politics.

With all the saints, I love and honor the Jewish people and believe in the covenant God made with Abraham to be a blessing to every family on earth. (Gen 12) The conquest of Canaan is one of the matters where the very character of God seems to contradict what God seems to be commanding. Abraham experienced this when he was commanded to kill the child who was the fulfillment of God's promise. He was willing to do so and raised his hand with the knife, but God prevented him from touching the child and provided a sacrifice in place of the child.

In the case of the invasion of Canaan, it seems that the sword was not stopped and the people were killed and the land taken. The goodness and faithfulness of God is beyond human understanding, so it will not do to be wiser than God. Yet God asks us to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God, expecting us to use discernment in choosing our way.

The Israelites are poised for this conquest, but first, the men receive circumcision and the community celebrates Passover. The manna stops the next morning, and they will step into their place in working for the community, seeing God guide and provide everything the community needs through those efforts.

Resources

Best, Earnest. Second Corinthians. Interpretation Series. (John Knox Press, 1987)

Creach, Jerome F.D. Joshua. Interpretation Series. (John Knox Press, 2003)

Keener, Craig. 1-2 Corinthians. The New Cambridge Bible Commentary Series. (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Matera, Frank J. II Corinthians: A Commentary. The New Testament Library Series. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003)

Soggin, J. Alberto. Joshua: A Commentary. The Old Testament Library Series. (The Westminster Press, 1972, English translation)

Van Wijk-Bos, Johanna W. H. The End of the Beginning: Joshua & Judges. (Eerdmans, 2019)