

LENT 4

Year C

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Joshua 5:9-12

⁹The 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.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal, they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and roasted grain. ¹²The 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.

Commentary from Benjamin Hopkins

During the wilderness years following the exodus from Egypt, God sustained the Israelites with manna, a miraculous bread from heaven. This experience prepared the people to enter the land God had promised to their ancestors. Now, under the leadership of Joshua, a new generation is ready to claim that promise. The children of those who left Egypt are circumcised at Gilgal and become the holy people who will inherit the land “flowing with milk and honey,” which will now be their sustenance (Joshua 5:1-8). The people transition from bread directly from heaven to eating bread made by their own hands, which comes from the produce of the land. They are now responsible for the stewardship and production of food for themselves, even as they continue to rely on God who has given the land to them and will determine victory or defeat.

Discussion Questions

How does the story relate to our experiences as a community sustained by God? What manna does God provide for us, and where does God give us freedom and responsibility to work in creation for our own nourishment and sustenance?

Do you see any similarity in this story to the experience of Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23-24)? What are the differences?

What feelings might the Israelites have experienced in transitioning from manna to bread made by their own hands from the land? How might these feelings have changed the way they related to one another, to the land, and to God?

Psalm 32

- ¹ Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!
- ² Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt,*
and in whose spirit there is no guile!
- ³ While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, *
and did not conceal my guilt.
- ⁶ I said," I will confess my transgressions to
the Lord." *
- Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.
- ⁷ Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to
you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not
reach them.
- ⁸ You are my hiding-place;
you preserve me from trouble; *
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.
- ⁹ "I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you
should go; *
I will guide you with my eye.
- ¹⁰ Do not be like horse or mule, which have no
understanding; *
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you."
- ¹¹ Great are the tribulations of the wicked; *
but mercy embraces those who trust in
the Lord.
- ¹² Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Commentary from Benjamin Hopkins

The psalmist expresses the immense feeling of freedom after confessing their sins to God. Hiding and failing to acknowledge our wrongdoing and selfishness can be physically, as well as spiritually and emotionally, damaging and painful. God is always ready to receive our prayers of confession and, in his mercy, offer a safe place of forgiveness – a refuge. God is never far from us, but we often feel isolated by our sins because of guilt and shame. We can rejoice and be glad because God's righteousness and mercy are eternal, and God is always ready to grant forgiveness when we ask.

Discussion Questions

What is keeping you from asking God for forgiveness? Do you believe that God is eager to free you from guilt?

How might you express your gratitude to God for mercy and forgiveness? What does it feel like to forgive? To be forgiven? Try to put these feelings into your own words.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Commentary from Benjamin Hopkins

Through baptism and our continued participation in the sacramental life of the church, we are all members of Jesus Christ and so are part of God's new creation. Paul's word choice indicates that more than merely individuals being made new, all who are "in Christ" become part of God's active reconciliation of the entire heavens and earth. That work of reconciliation, which is like a restoration of relationship, was accomplished by Jesus in history. It is also an ongoing process, "already and not yet," which the members of Jesus Christ are called to continue through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the church. The exchange between human imperfection and God's righteousness accomplished by Jesus is our hope for a future in which the church as the body of Christ is reconciled to God and works with God to continue that work in all creation.

Discussion Questions

How does our vision of the world and of others change because of our baptism and location "in Christ?"

Paul's language of "ambassadors" calls attention to his idea that, as Christians, we live as "dual citizens," with our primary allegiance to God as ruler of creation. What does it mean for us to live as citizens of God's Kingdom who have a responsibility like that of an ambassador, even as we also live as citizens of earthly kingdoms?

How does our participation in the sacramental life of the church deepen our connection to God?

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable:

^{11b} “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.’ ²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and

began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.’ ”

Commentary from Benjamin Hopkins

Jesus reveals a key characteristic of God through this parable: God is eager for reconciliation and relationship and does not hold our failures against us. Jesus was also revealing this characteristic of God through his consistent table fellowship with people who were considered “outsiders” to those in the religious establishment of his time. In the parable, not only does the father rejoice and call for a celebration when the “lost” son returns after rudely demanding his inheritance and then squandering it, but the father also counsels the elder son, who believes he has been faithful, to welcome his brother and drop his judgment and resentment, so that the two might be reconciled as well. All are in need of reconciliation with God and with one another, and God rejoices and gives of Godself extravagantly to make this possible.

Discussion Questions

What other moments from Jesus’ life and ministry can you think of that show God’s characteristics of love, mercy, and reconciliation?

Who do you think Jesus would eat with in our modern context that would fall outside the boundaries of religious or social convention?

How might we show the same desire for reconciliation as Jesus and the Father in our own communities?