

Living in the In-Between: Joshua 5:9-12
(Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; II Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)
Montecito Covenant Church – March 21, 2004 (4th Sunday of Lent: Confession)

Joshua 5:9-12

Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt.” So that place has been called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month – the month that marked their exodus from Egypt. The very next day they began to eat unleavened bread and roasted grain harvested from the land. No manna appeared that day, and it was never seen again. So from that time on the Israelites ate from the crops of Canaan.

Every good story has its shape. Perhaps some of you saw the article about Joseph Campbell in today’s News Press. Campbell, who died back in 1987, spent his life studying myths and epics, and puzzling out the ways enduring stories tend to take a certain shape; the hero embarks on a perilous journey, is subjected to tests and enduring ordeals, only to emerge finally victorious. Campbell’s work is what guided George Lucas to create *Star Wars* and what inspired countless other screenwriters to tell their stories the way they do.

The story of Israel is a good story, full of twists and turns, but always moving forward in the right direction, according to the script of the master storyteller. Today’s passage from Joshua chapter 5 brings us to a critical turning point in that story. They find themselves having crossed the Jordan but still living like nomads. They have a foothold in their promised land, but have not yet claimed any territory. (Their first assault, on Jericho, comes in chapter 6.) They have left behind their 40 years of wandering, but have not yet settled down. They are in geo-political limbo. They’re in the wood between the worlds. Or, if you like, they’re in the eye of the hurricane: one storm has past and all is calm, but another is about to begin.

Several important things happen during this in-between time.

First, in chapter four, the Israelites set up a rock pile to remind them of the way God carried them across the Jordan, the way God did again for them there what he did a generation earlier at the Red Sea. Two miraculous water crossings, like bookends 40 years apart, bracketing their long, arduous trek through the wilderness. Two reminders of God’s strength. Two good reasons to fear God. [Read Joshua 4:21-24]

We may be somewhere in the middle of our 40 days of Lent, but Israel has finally reached the end of her 40 years. Have you noticed, by the way, the way the number forty keeps coming around, again and again, in the Bible?

- Noah went through 40 days/nights of flood waters
- Moses was 40 when he fled from Egypt (Acts 7:30), twice 40 (80) years old when he returned to confront Pharaoh (Exod 7:7), and thrice 40 (120) years old when he died (Deut 34:7).
- The same Moses spent 40 long days and nights up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law (Ex 34:28).
- Just like Israel's spies spent 40 days crisscrossing the land (Num 13:25; 14:34).
- And Israel spent 40 years wandering the wilderness. [Why 40 years, do you remember? One year for every day the spies were in the land.]
- What about the 40 days of Lent? Where is that from? From Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness (Mt 4).
- Jesus also spent 40 days after his resurrection with his disciples (Acts 1:3). So Jesus had 40 days to begin his ministry, and another 40 to end it. Another set of bookends, perhaps.

God seems to like doing things in forties. For Israel, the number 40 will always represent missed opportunities and divine grace. Missed opportunities, because the spies had 40 days to spy out the land and decide to trust God for it, but didn't. And divine grace, because for the next 40 years God cared for Israel, making sure they would survive when the odds were heavily against them.

So the first event was a rock pile, a monument to remind parents and children that their story was moving forward according to God's pace and God's plot, not theirs. We find a second event during this in-between time in chapter 5:1-8: Joshua circumcises the new generation. None of the males born since leaving Egypt had been circumcised, as God had instructed Abraham. It was almost as if the covenant with Abraham [Gen 17] had been put on hold; almost as if they were waiting to see if God would really plant them in the land before they fulfilled their half of the bargain. But now it was time, past time, for the 40-and-under crowd to reconnect with God's promises. So, while the nations nearby were pulling back in fear (that's verse 1), Joshua sharpened up his knives and performed a major amount of minor surgery. (Don't forget: Abraham was 99 when he was circumcised, and Ishmael was 13 [Gen 17:24-25].)

All of which leads God to tell Joshua, there in verse 9, that the disgrace of Egypt has finally been removed. The shame of the slavery suffered by their parents and grandparents, the humiliation of that former life when another nation controlled their fate—all that was finally behind them as they walked out of the wilderness and into a land of their own, renewing their pledge to the God who delivered them from Egypt and who gave them a homeland flowing with milk and honey.

This circumcision party had to happen before a third event could come to pass in this in-between time: the celebration of Passover. According to Exodus 12:48, no male could celebrate Passover if he wasn't circumcised. But now that's all taken care of, so Israel broke out the unleavened bread, slaughtered their lambs and ate together. Once again, Israel reconnects with her past, with God's miraculous deliverance of her from Egypt.

Two more things happen—number four and number five—and they go closely together. Joshua 5:11 tells us they began eating the grains and the produce of the land, and then verse 12 tells us that when they did the manna abruptly ceased. Manna had been the gift that kept on giving. It first arrived way back in Exodus 16, not long after Israel escaped from Egypt, and it kept on showing up, day after day, for all those 40 years. But now, it was no longer needed for they were out of the desert and into the promised land (Josh 5:6). The perfect had come, so the partial could be done away with. An era had come to an end. There was no longer such a thing as a free lunch.

There is one more thing that happened in the in-between—the most remarkable and mind-boggling thing of all—but you’ll have to read about that for yourself there at the end of Joshua 5.

Israel’s time in-between, then, is full of memories and memorials, but it is also full of hope and expectation. Israel’s journey down into disbelief and death is now matched by a journey back up into faith and God’s strength. Old things have passed away; new things have come (2 Cor 5:17). It’s a story that would make Joseph Campbell smile.

Perhaps this old story should remind us of another story, found in another of today’s Lenten texts: Luke 15:11-32, the story we like to call the Prodigal Son. It’s the story of a son who goes off to a foreign country where he creates his own personal hell, only to repent of his sins and then return to a waiting, forgiving father. The son’s experience of forgiveness is captured nicely by the words of Psalm 32: 5, 7: “then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin. . . . You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

At least one well-known NT scholar thinks Jesus initially told the parable of the Prodigal Son as a thinly disguised story about the nation of Israel—not some wayward individual but an entire nation that found itself enslaved in a foreign land but then rescued, humbled, redeemed, forgiven and restored. We’re used to personalizing the Prodigal Son story—we read it as a tale about how individual sinners wander away from God and then repent, and about how God kindly takes them back. But maybe it’s more than that. Maybe it’s a story about *a people*. When *God’s people* repent and confess, God embraces them, extends forgiveness, kills the fatted calf, and grants them a new start.

So sin leads to confession . . . leads to redemption . . . leads to restoration . . . leads to new life. The story of Israel, the Prodigal son of God. Back in Joshua, God’s people are enjoying a new beginning. Israel’s time in Egypt is over, and she has come out of the wilderness finally to begin enjoying her inheritance.

The theme for this week’s service is *Confession*. Reading Joshua this week has made me wonder whether our notions of confession and redemption have been cheapened and thinned out—watered down by our Protestant evangelical concern to assert the sufficiency of the cross. When Israel was poised to enter the land for the *first* time (Num 14), the people disbelieved and rebelled against God. But if their remorse and Moses’

intercession lead right away to pardon (Num 14:20), why impose 40 years of exile? Why couldn't God simply forgive Israel and move on? It's a story that holds divine pardon together with judgment; God forgives (verse 20) but God also banishes Israel and sentences an entire generation of Israelites to death (verses 22-23).

So *sin* leads to *confession* which leads to *pardon*. But might it not also lead to *consequences*? Should we assume, when we confess, that we are automatically exempt from periods of spiritual probation? Do we, like Israel, sometimes need to pay a price for our disbelief? Would it help, during these days of Lent, to recover a Protestant form of "penance"? Maybe our Catholic friends are onto something when they assign each other acts of penance—not deeds that earn spiritual points before God but acts of obedience and discipline that show dramatically that we see the seriousness of sin, acts that demonstrate practically that our repentance is real and that sin often has consequences that cannot be prevented, no matter how ready God is to forgive.

New beginnings, like Israel's in Joshua 5, are never entirely new, are they? We don't generally forget the past. Confession doesn't normally induce bouts of moral amnesia. Rather, we're sobered by our past. Chastened. Humbled. We move out to conquer the land but we know that we could stumble once again, like last time and the time before that. Alongside ancient Israel, we live our lives "in between," on the verge of something new. Yet we can't, and we shouldn't, completely banish all thought of the old. Our sins from the past do not *condemn* us, but they do *remind* us, don't they, that we move forward only by God's grace.