

4th Sunday in Lent: Bible readings

Joshua 5: 9-12

⁹ Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰ On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. ¹¹ The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. ¹² The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

¹¹ "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Meditation

Do you know what it is like to have to walk and walk when you're hungry?
Have you ever made a long journey with few provisions, and all you can think about is food?

Have you ever known a longing for something which seems out of your grasp?

I'm sure we have all had experiences where we long for something but we can't be sure if we will get it.

Looking at our All-Age Story, this was also the case for the prodigal son: longing to taste again the rich food at his father's house.

And it was the experience of the Israelites wandering in the desert, longing for their promised land which was said to be flowing with milk and honey.

Wandering

Striving to survive

Longing for home, safety and love.

Hungry for food that tastes good and fills empty stomachs.

This is our theme for the 4th Sunday in Lent: Wandering. Striving. Longing. Hungry for more.

Let's take a dive into our Bible reading from the Old Testament book of Joshua. Here's a refresher of what has happened in the story of the Israelites up to this point:

The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for many years, and God wanted to liberate the Israelites. God performed many signs and wonders in Egypt to enable the people to escape from Pharaoh and the slave masters. On the night before their liberation, the Lord passed over the land. The Israelites were told to each sacrifice a lamb and spread the blood over the door posts and lintels of their houses, so that the Lord would not take their first-borns as the angel passed over. That night, they prepared a quick meal of flat breads and packed their belongings. This was the first Passover meal that the Israelites celebrated. And God instructed them to celebrate the Passover every year.

God chose Moses and Aaron and Miriam to lead the people out of Egypt. They made it miraculously through the Red Sea, into the wilderness, and eventually to within sight of the land which had been promised to them: a land flowing with milk and honey.

But it took them a long time to get there: 40 years! During all that time, God provided miraculous food for them every morning called 'manna'. The same food, every day, for 40 years. They were in survival mode, longing for the time when they could pack up their tents for good, settle down, and eat proper bread with milk and honey.

And during this time, the people forgot what God had done for them and they lost sight of the promise God had given them for their future. They became impatient, they tried to take matters into their own hands, and they did foolish things. And during all that time, they had only celebrated the Passover twice. By the time the people reached the edge of the Promised Land, there was a new generation. The old generation, including Moses, had passed away. A new leader, Joshua, was appointed to lead the Israelites on the final part of their journey, into the Promised Land.

And here we pick up our passage in Joshua chapter 5. They are on the threshold of the Promised Land at a place called Gilgal. It is the perfect moment to claim the land for themselves. But Joshua waits. Joshua knows that, even after 40 years, the people are not ready in their hearts. They needed to be reminded of who they are and who their God is. They needed to **look back** to where they had come from and to remember what God had done. And they needed to **look forward** to the promise that would soon be fulfilled, to the land that would soon be theirs. It was time to celebrate the Passover again.

Instead of walking straight in, Joshua knew the importance of **humility** before God. He knew that God could win any battle, and that *their* role was to come to God in humility.

The Passover is a meal 'on the brink'. It's a moment between slavery and liberation. Between wandering in the desert and entering the promised land. It's all about looking back at what's just happened and looking forward to what's to come. It's about preparing to leave one space and enter into another.

That day that Joshua and the people celebrated Passover, they also had the first taste of grains grown in the promised land. The next morning, there was no more manna. They didn't need it anymore. The old was gone, and they finally enjoyed the food of Canaan.

Jesus also told a story of a wanderer wanting to come home, to eat well and be settled. This is the story of the prodigal son, which Rachel read to us earlier. The son in the story was fed up of eating the pea pods the pigs were fed with, and longed for the comforts of home. This wanderer also humbled himself. He planned a speech of repentance and expected to suffer for his mistakes. He was even prepared to be humiliated in front of his father, his brother, all the servants and the neighbours. BUT, in Jesus' story, before he stepped into his old neighbourhood, even before he had given his speech of repentance, the Father had run to his younger son and embraced him. His humble heart was enough.

It is an echo of Psalm 32 which we read earlier: *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.*

Here is an interesting aspect to notice: The moment of encounter takes place on the road *between* the pig pen and the family home. It is a moment of raw humility in an inbetween place, looking back at the past and hoping for a better future. Just like the Passover.

In this story, the Father spends very little time dwelling on the wrongdoings or the wretchedness of the son. The moment of repentance takes place wrapped up in the arms of his father's hug. And they then walk together, as joyful father and beloved son, along the road and into the longed-for gates of the family home.

There is no doubt in the Father's mind. He celebrates his son's return wholeheartedly. There are fine clothes and feasting, dancing and laughing. He's finally home.

So to conclude, if you remember, this was our theme for the 4th Sunday in Lent: Wandering. Striving. Longing. Hungry for more.

But, no! That's not the full story!

This is also our theme for the 4th Sunday in Lent: Welcomed. Embraced. Feasted. Satisfied.

The wanderer *is welcomed*.

The one who has been striving to survive *can relax into the arms of the Father*.

The one who longs for good things to eat *is thrown a feast in their honour*.

The one who is hungry for more *is satisfied with good things*.

And how do we get from such a sorry state to this wonderful scene?

Humility is the turning point. The moment we recognise our sin and failure, it is a gateway to transformation.

The American clinical psychologist and Christian teacher James Finley puts it like this:

“At some point we come to realize how foolish we have been in the past. We are sorry about the suffering our foolish ways have caused ourselves and others. We are sincerely intent on not being so foolish in the future. But like the repentant son heading home to beg for his father's forgiveness, we are still labouring under the illusion that our wayward ways make us unworthy in the eyes of God.

Then, just as all seems lost, we look up to see God running toward us with open arms. Suddenly we realize there is no place within us that is not encountered, embraced, and made whole in a love that does not even care to hear our litany of shortcomings and regrets. We are profoundly loved by God without any foundations for being loved, except divine love itself.”

So, let's remember: Wherever you are on this journey, wherever you have come from, whatever foolish things you may have done, however many times you have tried to make amends, however long you have waited, even if you have given up hope, may you know that God always welcomes the humble. In our humility, God meets us on the way. God meets us in the inbetween spaces of life, *before* we see the promise fulfilled. God longs to embrace you, and God is ready to throw a feast just for you. Amen