

Lent 4c
March 27, 2022
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
Joshua 5:9-12 Psalm 32 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

The fourth Sunday of Lent used to begin with an entrance antiphon, words, instead of a hymn; the passage comes from the 66th chapter of Isaiah:
Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her.
Be joyful, all who were in mourning;
exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.

On this day we rejoice that we are halfway through Lent – there are 21 days until Easter; we look with great anticipation to Christ’s resurrection day, and take quick break to fortify ourselves for the remaining days of Lent, most especially Holy Week. Our liturgical color reflects our rejoicing, and we are given the option of using rose vestments and altar items. Christ’s resurrection is so pivotal to our lives that we do not abandon its joy, even in Lent.

In scripture we begin with a few verses from Joshua – a few verses with much background and meaning. In context, the Israelites have made it to the Promised Land. Moses has died, as have most of the people who spent those forty years in the desert. We are a generation or two past that long journey. For the first time, the people have been in the “land of milk and honey” long enough to plant crops, grow grains, and make bread for their celebration of Passover.

Manna, the strange food with the name of “what is it” stops appearing on the very day that the Israelites eat food that they have grown. Manna is clearly a very special gift from God. God poured out this strange form of sustenance for many years. In a desert with scarce resources of food and water, God provided manna, and there was enough for everyone, every day. Water came from a rock. In the harshest of situations, the Israelites had to rely solely on God, and God never let them down. Now that the people can make their own bread, Joshua is reminding us that these gifts, too, the fruits of the crops that they grow, also comes from God. Every blessing they have in the Promised Land is every bit as much about God’s grace as was the manna and water in the desert.

We hear this passage during Lent, our season that we especially remember our reliance on God. The gift of salvation and every gift we receive comes from the grace of God, not only in wilderness times, but also in times of joy. These ancient words ring clearly today: rejoice (in all things) and give thanks.

The parable of the prodigal son is one that we might have heard so many times that we have stopped noticing its messages, and its particular message of God’s grace. We start with the word “prodigal.” What does prodigal mean? From the parable, it seems like prodigal might mean, runaway, errant, wasteful. Right? Actually, prodigal means wastefully or recklessly extravagant. Rather than “the prodigal son,” we might have named this parable “our prodigal God.” The Israelite’s history and our own is one of a prodigal God – God provides for us in our wilderness times, even when we rebel, complain, and stray away from God. God is that extravagant!

In Christ, we are given the gift of salvation, the many gifts we have that come being made in God's image, in the talents, knowledge and abilities that we have – all from our recklessly extravagant God.

So we have in the parable a prodigal son, a recklessly extravagant **father**.

The oldest brother is right: the celebration is unfair. The younger brother wasted his inheritance while the father was still living. This was an insult to the father and to the honor of the family. Asking for and taking one's inheritance while the father was living is equivalent of wishing that his father dead; and receiving the inheritance means, in that society, that the son could never come back to that land, that place, and that family. And yet, the father was ridiculously, scandalously overjoyed when little brother came home.

That the prodigal father runs to meet his son is scandalous. Patriarchs do not run, nor do they leave from their place at the head of the table. The father does both actions, both of which are not honorable in this honor/shame society. Remember, too, that we do not hear that the younger son is repentant. He does not come home because he is sorry, but because he is hungry. All motives aside, the father rejoices at his son's return. The prodigal father risks his standing in the community, in his whole world, to reconcile with his unrepentant son.

The older son shows us a truth: God loves us. When we are righteous, God loves us. We are faithful to God and our family, and God loves us. The younger son shows us that even when we squander ourselves and our lives, God loves us, even pursues us – runs to meet us, at all costs. Our most loving God cares nothing about who is supposed to get the best coat, the finest banquet, or the biggest piece of cake. God is going to show up, pouring God's extravagant love and grace over us. God will meet us whenever we turn back to him. We turn to God in the best way and at all times. When we are obedient. And when we're broke. Maybe most especially when we're broken. Even when we come home, and embrace our father for the "wrong reason." God loves you beyond measure. When we "come home" to God in Christ, we are reconciled with our Lord. God rejoices.

Rejoice, my friends, rejoice.

Over the next few weeks, consider the specific ways in which you are completely reliant on God. Rejoice and give thanks. Prayerfully consider how you turn away from God. In the parable, each character loses sight of God. The younger son almost wishes his father dead and wastes an unearned inheritance. The older son loses sight of the grace he has received from God. He refuses to celebrate and thereby reconcile with his family – all through his perceived self-righteousness. The father loses both of his sons in different ways and loses his sensibility in *prodigal* rejoicing.

Rejoice today with a recklessly extravagant God who yearns to be in relationship with us. Give thanks for everything that we have and for who we are in Christ, with one another. Throw yourselves a (metaphorical) banquet. Know deeply that we who long for love and belonging, have everything with God, who pours out mercy instead of fairness. In this crazy story, the craziest of all is God's love for you. For that mercy and love, rejoice!