

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Old Testament, Year C

GOD SAVES

Joshua 5:9-12

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Paul Jaster

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 parched 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.

Author's Note: The best commentary on Joshua 5:9-12 is Walter Brueggemann's classic, The Land, to which this crossing is unabashedly indebted since WB is such a heavy weight crosser, too, on par with our founders, Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. This brief book is worthy of your attention whether you preach on this text or not.

DIAGNOSIS: Dis-graced

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Landlessness—The Promise Delayed

The story of Israel is the story of God's promises delayed. Land! That's the first promise God made to Israel in God's first sentence to a wandering Aramean by the name of Abram (Gen. 12:1). Yet, never did Abraham or any of the ancestors see that promise fulfilled. Some saw the land. Some dwelt in it. But never did they "possess" it until this moment in Joshua 5.

In addition to all the rootlessness and restlessness of our mega-mobile culture, we Christians, too, are frustrated and dismayed at God's promises delayed. Like the prodigal son we want our inheritance now...today! Here it has been almost 2,000 years since Jesus died and rose again, and we are still waiting for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Longing for it. Hoping for it. Praying for it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Faithlessness—the Promise Distrusted

As both Israel and the prodigal discovered over a long and tortuous road, landlessness leads to faithlessness. Here God gave manna in the wilderness as a sign that in a place of death there was life, because God was there with them, caring and providing for them. And still Israel murmured and complained. Rootless in a foreign land, the prodigal learned that a premature distribution of his inheritance did not produce the joy and happiness he thought it promised. And his despair led

him to a pig pen and the fodder that they ate. Faith quickly erodes in situations of wilderness and landlessness.

Faithlessness, rootlessness and landlessness is still a big problem around the world today whether you step into the Syria's, the sties, the cities, or the suburbs.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Hopelessness—the Promise Dis-graced

Doubting cannot annul God's promises, because these promises depend on the faithfulness of God and not on us—just as a saving grace is dependent totally on the graciousness of the waiting Father and not the self-serving confession of the son. However, doubting does leave God's promises unused and underutilized. Abraham never “possessed” the land God promised him. And yet, Abraham was liberated and empowered greatly by just the anticipation of it.

When we do not trust God's promises we are dis-graced. We are disconnected from the grace in the promises God gives, and we become slaves to ourselves and others in a foreign land. This is the “disgrace of Egypt” and the disgrace of the prodigal son...which God has already rolled away from us. And we will benefit from it, if only we will trust in the faithfulness of God.

PROGNOSIS: Jesus/Joshua = God Saves

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Land Entered—the Promise Fulfilled

“Jesus” and “Joshua” are synonyms. One Hebrew, the other Aramaic. Both mean “God saves.” Through the faithfulness of Joshua/Jesus/the Forgiving Father the promises of God are fulfilled and “crossings” are made. From wilderness across the Jordan to a settled, productive land. From manna to the produce (and, therefore, “gift”) of the land. From a pig sty into the waiting Father’s forgiving arms. From a cursed death into a blessed and fruitful life.

The “disgrace of Egypt” (slavery to self and others) is rolled away. Land is gifted. There is a gracious homecoming. And the crucified Jesus, the Bread of Life (manna for God’s new age) is gloriously raised...just as God had promised. The body and blood of Jesus given in bread and wine now “today!” becomes food for a journey. Our journey through life. Our bearings and our compass set according to the promises of God.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution): The Promise Trusted and Celebrated

Those who enter gifted land, those who return home to a waiting and forgiving Father, those who follow the blessings and benedictions of the resurrected Lord are promise-trusters. Not only do they trust, they celebrate! The first Passover off the produce of gifted land. Unleavened cakes & toasted grain. The remembrance of God’s rescue from Egypt and a key step in their

“possession” of the land. A sumptuous feast, courtesy of a fatted calf (the Christ figure in the story). The bread and wine of Holy Communion (that makes restless, mobile people “at home” anywhere they go). These all celebrate the gifts of God and God’s deliverance in strange and mysterious ways.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution): Land Cared For—the Promise Lived Out

Promise-trusters live in “gifted land” wherever they may be. Not “possessed” land or “owned land” or “managed land.” For land is never “owned.” It is given to “be cared for”—like Adam and Eve in Eden, Joseph in Egypt, and God for an earth that God loves—so-much he gives his only Son. Land brings responsibility. Land and the critters who live on it must be “taken care of.”

Irony isn’t it? Slaves become God’s servants in God’s mission to and for the world. The “sty ward” once again becomes a son and a “steward” (from the Old English “sty ward”) of the ring, robe, and redemption given him. In short, his sonship. And those who die and rise with Christ, the Bread of Life, become a Eucharistic people, who are “at home” wherever and whenever the Gospel is preached and sacraments administered. Thanks to the God of Promise, our shame and our “dis-grace” becomes a “saving grace,” a promising future, a duty, and a calling.

Good Lord Jesus, you live up to your name. Nice save!