

THE OTHER SIDE OF JORDAN

March 14, 2010

Texts – Joshua 5: 9 - 12

Luke 15: 11 - 32

“The Other Side of Jordan” . . . That’s where our scripture lessons for this day take place. It is where our lives are lived – the other side of Jordan.

For forty years, you remember, the people of Israel wandered in the desert. Oppressed and in bondage in Egypt, they had fled Pharaoh’s army and crossed the Red Sea. But freedom was lonely and frightening and tough. They went to Sinai, that dark and forbidding mountain of fire, to receive the commandments of God, but they grew tired of the waiting and the struggle. They began to yearn for the good old days. “*Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,*” they murmured, “*when we sat by the flesh pots and ate bread to the full.*”

[Exodus 16: 3]

They were hungry and frightened and alone; at least they thought they were. “This thing is too tough,” they said; “this is getting out of hand!” The latter statement, of course, was only partly true. It was out of their hands; they were helpless, genuinely and sincerely so. But they were in God’s hands, and so God sent them “bread from heaven,” *manna* from heaven.

It wasn’t enough, you remember, to satisfy them. It did not stop their whining or their complaining. In the shadow of Sinai they built for themselves an idol out of gold. It seemed, I’m sure, like a good investment – gold is where frightened money still runs in times of crisis and disorder, and those were bad times. But God was incensed and infuriated. God destroyed their little nest-egg. The Exodus narrative reports that Moses burned their golden idol, ground it into powder, threw the ashes into water, and then made the Israelites drink it [Exodus 32: 15ff]. This was an angry God, full of wrath – the kind of God we don’t often imagine for ourselves. We need to

come to terms with this aspect of God (I know I do), but that's for another day. Here let us just note that in great anger and wrath, God decreed that this whole generation of Israelites should languish in the wilderness, and that only their children should be allowed to enter the promised land. The one redeeming aspect of their exile was that God did not abandon them completely – the *manna* from heaven continued to fall each morning.

This is where our passage from Joshua comes in, for at this point in the story the long sojourn in the wilderness has come to an end. The second generation of Israelites has arrived; they've finally made it. They've done what even Moses could not do – they've crossed over to the other side of the Jordan. And here, three things happen –

1. First, the future becomes radically open;
2. Second, there is no more *manna*; and
3. Third, there is no more “tomorrow,” in the sense that “we'll get there tomorrow,” for we're already there.

Look at those three with me.

First, the future becomes radically open. God says to Joshua, “*I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.*” [5: 9] The Sinai experience of Israel, the languishing for forty years in the desert wasteland, was a forced confinement. That first generation did not make it to the other side of the Jordan, the story says, not because they didn't want to, but because God wouldn't let them. It was out of their power to control. But, once their children did cross over, God said, “*I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.*” You are free, in other words. You can go where you want to go; you can do what you want to do. “*The reproach of Egypt . . . I have rolled away.*”

The language suggests a tomb or cave, its entrance sealed by a great stone ... but lo, the stone has been rolled away, and we who were locked inside now stand dumb-founded, blinking

into the sunlight. That's what it's like living on the other side of Jordan. You are free. The future is open.

It's so open, in fact, that like the prodigal son in our New Testament lesson, you can take the money and run; but you can also blow it. Isn't it interesting that this parable from Luke's gospel has come to be known as the "parable of the prodigal son"? Jesus didn't give it that title; neither did Luke. In fact, when you look at it closely, it could just as easily be called the parable of the forgiving father, or the parable of the resentful son. But we call it "the parable of the prodigal son." It's pretty clear with whom we identify. To be sure, there's a bit of the resentful son in each of us, and sometimes even a touch of the forgiving father, but the prodigal child – the one who's impatient and headstrong and eager to spread his or her wings, and who inevitably blows it . . . this is the one with whom we resonate most completely. You can be that way on the other side of the Jordan, because you're free and the future is radically open.

There's a dark side to freedom, in other words. We discover it in our parenting, don't we? How longingly we wait for our children to grow up. How impatient we sometimes are for them to come of age and no longer require our constant supervision and daily taxi service to and from school and sports and lessons. But oh, what a price we sometimes then pay in terms of anxious hours spent awaiting their safe arrival home with the family car, to say nothing of how hard it is to trust they'll make the right decisions about alcohol and drugs and sexual morality. When you live on the other side of the Jordan, the good news is also the bad news – the future is open, and mistakes can be made which are harmful and hurtful. It's not inevitable, of course, but it is possible.

Here's a second thing about life on the other side of the Jordan – there's no more *manna*. The passage from Joshua says: "*On the morrow after the Passover* [in other words, on the day after they had crossed the river], *on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened*

cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased on the morrow ... and the people of Israel had manna no more." [Joshua 15: 11-12]

Now again, this is good news and bad news. It's good news in that the exile experience is over; the desert is behind you; you've crossed over the Jordan and there is fruitful land. It's possible to find sustenance and strength from the natural order. You now have the ability, in other words, to respond to life freely and independently; but that means you must take responsibility for your life because there is no more *manna*, no more "bread" to drop miraculously from the sky on the morning of each day.

A lot of us would like to have that *manna* again. We'd like to have God intervene miraculously in our lives, in our marriages, in our personal struggles, in the world of nations. I remember talking with a man once who claimed to have been fabulously successful in his business as a real estate investment broker. The price of his success, he went on to say however, had been frighteningly high. "It's cost me two marriages," he said. As we talked it became apparent that he was deeply hurt, wounded and puzzled by that experience. Both of his wives had left him – one after five years, the other after seven. Neither one could tell him why, at least not in terms that he was able to hear. But what puzzled him even more was what he described as "the absence of God." I'm not a church member, he said in so many words, but "I prayed and prayed and prayed for a miracle, for God to help me, to make things right, but nothing came." There was no *manna* from heaven.

The price of freedom is the possibility of failure. The good news is that you have the ability to respond to life freely. That's what God promised the children of Israel – a land of freedom, flowing with milk and honey. But when you enter that land, you have to leave the *manna* behind you. It's not that God has abandoned you. It is, rather, that we are to find God in the midst of this world, not somehow outside of it.

Finally, there's this third thing – There is no more “tomorrow” on the other side of the Jordan . . . not in the sense of “we’ll get there tomorrow” . . . for we’re already there. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “*The kingdom of God is at hand.*” Do you remember how the Gospel of Thomas translates that? “*The kingdom of heaven is not coming with signs for men and women to observe. The kingdom of heaven is spread out upon the earth, but women and men do not see it.*” It’s here. It’s all around you. I find it interesting and not coincidental that this is exactly what the forgiving father said to the elder son, who resented the great feast which was given for his brother.

On the other side of the Jordan, you can spend all your days toiling and never receive the inheritance you’ve been promised – not because it is forbidden you, but because you never open your eyes to the reality which is all around you. “*My child,*” the loving father says in the parable, “*you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*” [Luke 15: 31]

How poignant that is! Many of us are that older, resentful child. We’ve been good; we’ve put in our time; we’ve played by the rules; but for self-serving reasons. We expected that we’d be rewarded some day; that the fatted calf would be slaughtered for us. And so, all the while, we never really lived in the present . . . never enjoyed the fullness of the present. The older brother was always looking ahead, always performing for that report card. But life is what happens while you’re on your way to somewhere else. Jesus proclaimed over and over again – “*The kingdom is at hand!*”

On the other side of Jordan the future is radically open. On the other side of Jordan there is no more *manna*; and on the other side of Jordan there is no more “tomorrow,” in the sense that “we’ll get there tomorrow,” for we’re already there. All of which means that God’s grace and nurture and love are all around us today – in the touchable, taste-able, tangible moment of now. Not waiting to drop unexpectedly from the sky, but here . . . in you, in me, in all of us as we

begin to realize that we've crossed the Jordan. This is the promised land, the promised time.

The future is open; we have the ability to respond to life freely. Yes, it is an awesome responsibility we have, but it is also a priceless gift. Let us thank God for it each and every day.

Amen.