

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, March 13, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Grace to you and Peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

Return, Repentance and Reconcile.

The people of Israel had been here before. They had been there at the border into the Promised Land, about four decades previously to be accurate. They had left Egypt more or less on the run. They had a pit stop at Mt. Siani where they picked up some instructions. They had a little bit of a problem with Aaron and a golden calf, but they got out of that situation. They were there at the border, on the edge, ready to enter into the Land that their ancestors had left hundreds of years before. And it was when they were there, before, with Moses, that they had sent in a bunch of spies, twelve to be specific. One from each of the tribes, to scope out what the land looked like, to check things out, to see where it was that they stood. And the spies returned with the proverbial "good news/bad news" scenario: The good news (we learn when we look back in the book of Numbers) – "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." (Num 13:27 NRSV) and they held up big clumps of grapes and wonderful fruit that they had stolen from the folks who were living there. The bad news – "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. . . . and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num 13:32-33 NRSV).

They were scared. They didn't want to go. Of the twelve though, two stood up: Joshua and his buddy Caleb. Joshua and Caleb say to the people, yes, "The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no better than us; their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them." (Num 14:7-9 NRSV) The people don't listen; they don't want to hear it. They raise their voices, so the Lord God Almighty steps in, protects Caleb and Joshua and says to the people, 'Fine if you don't want to go in you don't have to. As a matter of fact, nobody is going to go in except Caleb and Joshua . . . everybody else: outta the pool.'

So, the people of Israel, everybody who is age 20 and above who complained against going into Canaan, they never make it back in. They're all sent off into the wilderness until that generation dies off, about forty years, and here they are back at the border.

A couple of things we need to remember about their time in the wilderness is that it's a wilderness. Lord God provided them water, provided them meat in the form of Quail, and provided them manna. ("What is it?" Manna.) These are important things, because without these things, people would pretty much . . . perish because

it is the "wilder-ness." It's NOT a place where you flourish. It's NOT a place to grow crops, and it's frankly NOT a place to SURVIVE, period. So the Lord God provides for them. Now they are about to enter the land. They know from before that there is indeed plenty in The Land; they won't need to scrape just to survive. There should be enough not only to survive but to prosper. And so that's when we hear those words as Dave read them tonight: "The 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." One manner of God providing stopped and another began. The people had returned, there was repentance on their part, and now reconciliation.

With our Gospel reading, we have a story that we may be way over tired of hearing, if you spent much time in church you've probably heard this story so many times you can recite it in your sleep. One son demands his inheritance. He takes it and leaves, he spends it recklessly, he gets himself into a dead-end job, and he realizes in the very least, the help back home, back on the farm, they have it better off than what he does, and so he heads home, hat in hand, spewing out a request for a job, regardless of how sincere he may be about his apology.

The older son, on the other hand, who DIDN'T demand his inheritance, the older son that DID stay at home, the older son who DID keep working, DIDN'T have any wild parties, is none too happy with his father because of dad's responds to little brother (I am sure this never happens in any other family). Dad has given in to the demand of the inheritance, let the kid go along with a great deal of money, and upon his return, receives him with joy, with open arms, with great celebration, with forgiveness. And so, like Joshua and the Israelites about to enter Canaan, we've definitely got a Return going on here, but I am not so sure about the Repentance part, and there doesn't appear to be any Reconciliation going on between brothers at all.

Yet, what is our own faith like? What is it in our life from which we need to return, or to put it more personally, what is it that I am running away from God? What is it from which I need to Return? What is it from which I need to Repent? What is it from which I need to be Reconciled? It's really easy to look at others and say, well obviously, that is where they messed up. How could she have left him? Or, would you just look at the way those kids dress? It's easy to point out the faults in other people. Look at how well the older brother does it, and I know that I have on more than one occasion shaken my head on the behavior of others, but then I have to wonder, how often God has done that about me?

We know from reading the rest of the book of Joshua, that the people came into Canaan and made it their own. They had good days and not so good days. There were days that they followed the Lord God and there were days that they went their own way, doing what it was that they wanted, not what the Lord was calling them to do.

The prodigal son, we know that he made up to dad, but how does he fare in the long run? Does he stick around there on the farm when things don't go so well?

Does he remain a farm hand or is he elevated once again to the position of son? And the older brother? That's a part of the story which has so many possibilities. The older brother could have reconciled with his younger brother, he could have been a thorn in his kid brother's side for the rest of their lives. We don't know from this story.

What we do learn as we look at these two stories together is that Repentance comes from within. Reconciliation relies on another person, the one from whom I am estranged wanting to reconcile with him. Things don't always happen that way; I may return to someone whom I have wronged or someone who I think has wronged me, and I might reach that point of repentance, the place where I want to be reconciled, but if that person isn't in the same place, we might end up like the Israelites, that first time that they were there at the border, or like the older brother pouting out in the field.

What I need to remember, what I invite us to remember, is that, with God's help we can do it. And we need to learn, I need to remember, it's not about what I want, it's not about what I can do, but rather not letting myself go first, putting God first, to do that which needs to be done.

To Return, to Repent and to be Reconciled.

Amen.