

## ***Healing the Past***

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, March 14, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 5:9–12c

Most of you are probably familiar with the expression “a senior moment.” It is shorthand for “a senior citizen moment of forgetfulness” and is usually used rather flippantly to describe those moments in our lives when our memories fail us. Age has little to do with those moments, but it does seem that the older I get the more senior moments I have. It reminds me of the *Peanuts* cartoon I saw some time ago. Charlie Brown says, “My grandfather loves to sing hymns. He can remember the words to over a hundred of them.” Linus asks, “Does he sing in the choir?” To which Charlie responds, “No, he can’t remember where the church is!”

Sadly, the problem for many of us is not that we can’t remember events in our pasts, but rather that we can’t forget them. We don’t need psychologists to remind us that the past plays a powerful part in how we live our lives in the present. Modern studies have estimated that we spend as much as 50 percent of our emotional energy trying to repress painful memories. Some among us have had experiences that have traumatized us in some way, and, if they haven’t been softened for us, we still feel the effects in our lives. There are those among us who have known abuse, physically, mentally, or emotionally; there are those who lived in poverty or ignorance; there are those homes that were more like war-zones than places of safety and comfort. Maybe someone close to us died and left a hole in our lives that we feel to this day. Maybe we did something out of foolishness one time that we can’t seem to forgive ourselves for. All sorts of things that run the gamut of human experience may have occurred in our pasts, and we carry something of the baggage of it with us still. And if that past continues to draw upon our energies for living, we can’t live fully in the present.

How do we deal with those painful parts of our past? How do we, not forget the past, but find healing for it so we can move forward and live more fully in the present? The rather obscure verses from our First Lesson from Joshua give us some clues, believe it or not.

The Israelites have crossed the Jordan in a fashion reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea, and finally, 40 years after leaving the bondage of Egypt, they have reached the borders of the Promised Land. Gilgal is their first stop as they begin to establish a beachhead in Canaan. In front of them is Jericho and a hundred other places to be conquered before the land is fully theirs again. Gilgal became holy ground to the people of Israel. It was the base of their operations against the enemy. They would return here again and again.

And it is at Gilgal that the rite of circumcision is put into practice again. For the 40 years of the wilderness wandering, it had not been practiced. Circumcision was the seal of God’s covenant with Abraham. It was the mark of the promise that Abraham and his descendants would possess the Promised Land of Canaan. Circumcision is the mark signifying the entrance of the Israelite males into the

covenant with God. The term 40 years is code language in the Old Testament for one generation. After 40 years of wanderings, now a new generation is brought into the covenant. And it is at this point in the story of the people of God that our first lesson text picks up today.

"Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt," God tells the people. Heretofore the Israelites had been slaves, despised on the earth, the lowest rank of human beings. Now they were slaves no longer. Now they were God's people, initiated into a new identity and given infinite worth in the eyes of the Lord. As a symbol of that, the place of their encampment is called Gilgal, from the Hebrew verb "to roll" and whose noun form usually refers to a circle of stones. They formed those stones around their encampment to remind them: God has rolled away their identity as slaves and made them a free and chosen people. The past is over. A new day begins in the new land.

There are, perhaps, those among us this day who have a past that hasn't been forgiven. I doubt whether there is anyone in the sound of my voice today who hasn't had to wrestle with something in their past that has caused them sleepless nights or some degree of pain. I knew a woman who went to her grave at the age of 75 still mourning the loss of a love that she let go when she was but 18 years old. She never married and to her last breath would call upon the name of her beloved whom she had rejected in a moment of teenage spite and who walked out of her life but not out of her heart and memory forever. That sad woman dealt with that loss for over 50 years in her mind and heart. It was only in the later stages of her life, when illness began to take its toll that she allowed me to speak words of forgiveness and grace as we shared in private communion at her sick bed. She had refused communion all those years because she couldn't allow herself to be forgiven of a past that had controlled all of her adult life.

How do we find healing for the past? Our scripture story today tells us it was God who rolled away the disgrace of his people. Just like he would roll away the stone from the grave of his Son and allow a new life to be given to all of us. We don't practice circumcision as a ritual anymore in the Christian Church, but we do have its equivalent, which we will (have) witness(ed) today – baptism! That is our sign of entrance into the new covenant through Jesus the Christ, and it has the same meaning that the ancient ritual of Gilgal had. It means that we are slaves no longer. Through Word and Water, we now enter into a new life given to us by Jesus Christ. We are now delivered from our slavery to sin and to death. We now can cut the fetters of the past away, because God has forgiven our pasts, no matter how terrible, how frightful, how painful. And if God can forgive us, who are we not to forgive ourselves? And this God of ours who has the power to raise from the dead, the power to overcome death and the devil, the power to forgive our pasts, don't we think this God has the power to heal that past as well? "I have rolled away from you the disgrace," says our God.

The Psalmist today reminds us in poetry of the same truth:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!

As celebration of their new redeemed life, the Israelites at Gilgal celebrated the Passover, just as the first generation had celebrated it after their deliverance from

slavery in Egypt. It is a meal of remembrance where the mighty deeds and the loving acts of God for them are recalled.

And so with us, too. As those who have been baptized, who can know new life in Christ, we too celebrate our covenant meal. At the sacrament of the altar, we hear the words of forgiveness again and again, and receive a meal that gives us courage to face the world and all our memories with renewed hope. In the bread and wine we receive the love of God poured out for our sins and for our pasts. The meal is a sign of the new covenant we can know in the Christ who invites us to dine with him in a new Kingdom. We no longer need to be slaves to a past we cannot change. We are offered healing by a God who loves us into life, so that the present can be lived as the gift it is to us.

For the Israelites, the wilderness journey was over, the manna was no longer the meal they would share, and a new life was beckoning them with the promise of God's presence into their futures. For us, the past is forgiven by the mercy of God. Now we can, and we are called to, live in a new land, a land of love, of reconciliation, of peace. Sure, there will be battles ahead for all of us, just like the Hebrews of old who took almost 200 years to re-establish themselves in the Promised Land, but in our baptisms, God has promised to be with us always, to bless, care for, love and forgive us.

There is a wonderful story about a great man named Dr. Frank Bateman Stranger. He was the former president of Asbury Seminary who died in 1986. He was a man of integrity and great faith. In his final days, as the story goes, he had a hospice nurse with him. One day, not long before he died, wanting to know just how aware he was, the nurse asked him if he knew what year it was. He said, "73." He didn't know the year. She said, "Do you know who I am?" He smiled, but shook his head in confusion. He didn't know who she was, only that she was caring for him. Then the nurse asked, "Do you know where you are?" And Dr. Stranger firmly and without hesitation replied, "Chapter 8 – Romans Chapter 8!"

He knew where he was. "For I am persuaded," wrote Paul, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And that's where we all are. Wrapped in the arms of a God who spread them on a cross so that we don't ever have to be slaves to a past we cannot change.

AMEN.

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