

The Day the Manna Ended

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, March 14, 2010)

Joshua 5:9-12 ⁹The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have removed from you the disgrace of being slaves in Egypt.” That is why the place was named Gilgal, the name it still has.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camping at Gilgal on the plain near Jericho, they observed Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month. ¹¹The next day was the first time they ate food grown in Canaan: roasted grain and bread made without yeast. ¹²The manna stopped falling then, and the Israelites no longer had any. From that time on they ate food grown in Canaan.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (TEV) ¹One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts came to listen to Jesus, ²the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, “This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!” ³So Jesus told them this parable: “There was once a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. ¹³After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. ¹⁴He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. ¹⁵So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. ¹⁶He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. ¹⁷At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against God and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.’” ²⁰So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. ²¹‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.’ ²²But the father called to his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. ²³Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! ²⁴For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began.

²⁵“In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him, ‘What’s going on?’ ²⁷‘Your brother has come back home,’ the servant answered, ‘and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. ²⁹But he spoke back to his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! ³⁰But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!’ ³¹‘My son,’ the father answered, ‘you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’”

Most people, when they hear the name, “Joshua,” think about the battle of Jericho. If you know something about Old Testament history, you might remember that Joshua was the leader of Israel who followed Moses. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses. Joshua, the Old Testament book, begins with Joshua taking up the leadership of the Israelites. He begins by listening to God and the obeying God’s orders. He instructs the Israelites to prepare to cross the river in three days, he sends spies ahead to make observations, and when the time came, God parted the waters of the Jordan and the people crossed over.

And then what? Joshua, chapter 4, tells us that one man from each of the 12 tribes carried a stone from the Jordan River to the river bank and Joshua built a stone pillar. In chapter 5 we read that Joshua then led the people in an act of rededication. All the men and boys who had not been circumcised were circumcised. For the people of Israel this would be a sign of recommitment to God. And on the fourteenth day of the month, they observed their most sacred worship, Passover, and the next day, according to our lesson, they ate food that had been grown in the land, and the manna stopped falling.

You remember manna? Within a few days of their fleeing from Egypt, whatever food the Israelites may have brought along into the wilderness was consumed. They were hungry, they complained to Moses, and Moses prayed to God, and God sent something every night for them to eat. Exodus 16 says it was as fine, and I presume as plentiful, as frost. We have certainly seen enough frost these past few months to understand what that is. The people didn't know what it was – they called it “Manna,” which one of my Seminary professors suggested should be translated, “whatchamacallit.” And the amazing thing about the manna, or “whatchamacallit” was that it was nourishing. God sent the manna every day and they would collect enough to sustain them for the day, except on the day before the Sabbath, when they could collect twice as much, and then not have to labor to collect manna on the Sabbath. God took care of them, protected them and fed them, throughout their sojourn in the wilderness.

But then they crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land, and the manna ended. Did that mean that God didn't love them any more, that God stopped caring for them? I don't think so. God had safely brought them to a Promised Land, a land that was flowing with milk and honey, as it was repeatedly described in the Old Testament. But the people now would have to work for it. They would need to till the soil, plant the seed, prune the grapevines, harvest the grain, and I guess if they wanted milk and honey they would have to milk the cow and harvest the beehive.

God still loved these special, chosen people. God still protected them, provided for them and blessed them far more than they deserved. But God also expected something from them in return. God expected them to love and obey God, to love one another, to help one another, and all who were able would have to labor, according to their various abilities, even in the Promised Land. Some people think of labor as a curse. After all, when God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden, didn't God say, in Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread”? Does that mean all our hard work is a curse from God?

That is not what the younger brother, the Prodigal Son, thought about labor. When he came to his senses, Jesus said, he realized that the servants in his father's farm were better off than he was. His father had given him a most generous inheritance, had left him go out and enjoy the good life, and although we are not told that he didn't work, it seems that he did nothing constructive until the money ran out. And then he came to his senses, and he wanted to return to work, even work as a servant on his father's farm. And in that same parable, do you remember the older brother's complaint? He said, “Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave...” Was that a curse, or a good thing? The older brother complained about working – but it certainly looked good to the younger brother.

Where do you fit in this story? We like to think of ourselves as the younger brother. We would all admit that we have made mistakes. We have wasted time, not used our talents and squandered at least some resources, although I trust none of us have spent it all on riotous living, like that Prodigal Son. And so we want to hear how the father forgives us, and loves us, and welcomes us home. But have we ever acted like the older brother? Perhaps jealous of the forgiven one, perhaps disappointed because we haven't been given an engraved invitation to the party, perhaps just complaining because of all the work we have to do. Can we just begin to appreciate that our skills, our abilities to work, are in fact a blessing? Or maybe we need to act more like the father, ready to forgive, ready to love, ready to accept.

There is one more interesting lesson for us in the lesson from Joshua. Maybe it is just a coincidence – or maybe it is a good lesson for us today. Of all the names that could have been given to the place, it seems that “Gilgal” was a strange choice. It could have been called “Joshua's Crossing” or the “Place of Rededication” or even the “Place of Many Circumcisions.” But it was called “Gilgal” which our translation says means “I have removed from you...” The Hebrew word at the root of the name “Gilgal” actually means “rolled” or “wheeled away.” As the Israelites came into their Promised Land, God “rolled away” the disgrace of having been slaves in Egypt. They became a new people, in a new land. There was no way that they could have overcome the stigma of having been a slave people, and so that burden that they were unable to budge, God “rolled away.” Do you remember what else God “rolled away?” As the women came to Jesus' tomb, were they not asking how they might roll the stone away? They knew they could not do it – but again, God rolled it away. God rolled the stone away, and then gave the women a task, to go and tell the disciples. And God gave the disciples a task, to be his Apostles. And God gives each one of us a task. This is not a curse – it is a blessing.

There is no more manna – the manna has ended. From this time on, we will eat bread by the sweat of our brow. We are called to labor in God's vineyard. We are commissioned to serve God – and that is truly a blessing. Amen.