

Text: Joshua 5
St Stephen's

March 14, 2010
Sun AM

Out of the Wilderness, Into the Promised Land

On the weekends of Lent we are looking at the theme of **wilderness** that is so prevalent in the OT and the NT.

We've looked at Abraham and Jesus and last week, at Moses. We left **Moses** last week, when he was **79 or 80** years old, at the moment God called him to **go back to Egypt and rescue his people**.

We saw that Moses had been **prepared for that call by his years in the wilderness**. There for 40 years he had been tutored in a **curriculum** of obscurity and scarcity, where Moses learned to **be a nobody**. He had been tutored in a lesson plan of solitude and silence, where he learned to **make room for Somebody**, someone far greater, someone Moses met face to face in the Burning Bush. That was where Moses found himself on holy ground, and he **took off his shoes**.

We pick up the story today some **40 years later**. A lot has happened.

- Moses went back to Egypt and led the Jewish people out of their captivity. They crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and came to Mt Sinai.
- There they worshipped God and received the law, and there they worshipped the golden calf and barely survived God's anger.
- They were directed to an early entrance to the Promised Land, but the reports of the size and numbers of the inhabitants frightened them, and they begged to be led back to Egypt.
- God redirected them on their own 40 year trek through the school of wilderness where he fed them with manna every morning, where he came and dwelt among them in the tabernacle, and shaped them for what lay ahead.

It has been a long 40 years, and finally **the day has come** to cross the Jordan River and enter the promised land. Today we see God's

people moving through a famous **transition** from one season of life to another, from one phase of redemption to another. It is a study in **God's passageways**, and we are in one of those passageways now.

Israel comes to the **Jordan** river (do you remember that the choir led them across that river?) and **crossed** on dry ground. This is Israel's entrance out of the desert onto the international stage. **Behind** stayed the aged **Moses**, now 120 years old, and forbidden by God to cross into the Promised Land. He would be buried on the far side of the Jordan. **Ahead** lay **Jericho**, a fortified city that stood guarding the entrance to the Promised Land.

Many **military strategists** would have encouraged Joshua to push **full speed ahead**. 'Hit 'em fast and hit 'em hard' – we have names for campaigns like: 'Rolling Thunder' and 'Desert Storm'.

But God tells Joshua to do something unusual. Having crossed the Jordan, about a mile short of Jericho out on the plains, **Israel stopped** for **weeks** – maybe months - in a place called **Gilgal**. Because she was not yet ready for the battles that lay ahead.

There was no getting around **Jericho**. The walls were stronger and thicker and taller than any Israel had ever seen. This was a solidly fortified city, filled with men capable of defending it. Israel for her part had no ramparts, no battle towers, no chariots, no battering rams, no training in modern warfare. They were straight out of the desert. Her men were armed with swords and javelins and bows and arrows and slings. That was pretty much it. No observer would have given Israel much of a chance against such a well fortified city. Israel was **overmatched** – humanly speaking. And there was no going back.

So God tells Joshua to **stop**. To pause. Because her preparation was not complete. In those weeks of pause...

Their Men Were Circumcised

After all the males had been circumcised, they rested in the camp

until they were healed. Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt."

Joshua 5.8-9

This is no way to prepare men for battle!! They would be unable to fight for weeks while they healed – and vulnerable to attack during those weeks!! But it is exactly what God ordered!!!

To the Jews circumcision was a sign of **separation**, a sign that they were **different** than all the people of the Gentile lands. It was something of what we call **a sacrament** – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The outward sign was male circumcision – but the inward sign was a consecrated heart. Moses and Jeremiah are the first ones in the bible to talk about circumcision as the cutting away of the old life and the result of a new heart, a circumscribed heart.

Look at the word *'healed'* and the phrase *'rolled away the shame of your slavery.'* Circumcision in the Old covenant **parallels baptism** in the new covenant - it is a call to **repentance** – to let the old life go. God is performing **radical spiritual surgery** here, and like any good surgeon, God cuts to heal, he prunes for growth, and he kills in order to raise the dead. It is **not possible to move into God's future with an old heart.**

We are in a **major transition at St St** these years as we move from the old Episcopal denomination to the new Province. Again and again in this season of transition, God has reminded us that **our old ways must change** – or we won't be able to go forward. This theme came up again and again when I was down at Plano, Tx a couple of weeks ago at the **church planting conference**. One speaker told us that if this is a **lifeboat movement** it will fail- if we are only in this for ourselves, it will fail. Someone else asked us what we were **willing to fight for**. He said, if all you are willing to fight for is buildings, this movement goes nowhere. Are you willing to **fight harder for lost people than you do for buildings and property?**

In seasons of radical transition, God does radical spiritual surgery to remove our shame and heal our lives and get people ready for what lies ahead.

Their Diet Was Changed

They celebrated Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month. The very next day they began to eat unleavened bread and roasted grain harvested from the land. No manna appeared on the day they first ate from the crops of the land, and it was never seen again.

Joshua 5.10-12

Israel had a **simple diet** in the desert. **Manna**. Every morning the dew would leave a white pasty substance on the ground. They would gather it and bake it and eat it. They had no source of wheat or grain or vegetables or fruits – just manna. But it proved enough for all those years. Now as they made ready for the battles that lay ahead, God changed their diet, **upped their nutrition**. First it was the Passover meal, then the harvest that lay all around them in that land.

I'm interested that Joshua notes the **Passover meal first**. You remember that meal, eaten in haste as they left Egypt. Unleavened bread, a roasted lamb sacrificed and eaten on the run, blood spread over their doorposts as the angel of death swept through Egypt and 'passed over' the houses of the Jews.

St Paul says that **Christ is our Passover**. That he himself is the Passover lamb whose blood is spread over us. Jesus said that **his body is real food and his blood is real drink**.

This is the meal that they shared. Before they stepped into God's future they had this meal, this food. They **gathered under the mercy** of God, under the blood of the lamb. They couldn't move into God's future unless they first ate and drank from that table.

That food was **served in the corridor** from the past to the future for Israel. That is why week after week, we speak of the Cross of Jesus, we come to the table of Jesus, we feed on the death of Jesus – so that we can live the life of Jesus.

There is **one more incident** in these weeks of pause. It happens while Joshua has taken some **time to scout out this fortified city**. I can imagine him wondering – ‘how are we ever going to take that city?’ He was apparently within sight of the city, looking it over and making his plans...

When Joshua was near the town of Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with sword in hand...

*Joshua went up to him and demanded, "Are you friend or foe?"
"Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the LORD's army."*

Joshua 5.13-14

We aren't told how the man appeared, just that Joshua had been looking down, maybe lost in thought, and **suddenly** something catches his attention and he looks up – and there he is, **an armed man, a formidable man, with sword drawn**. It is a startling moment.

Joshua responds like a leader – he has no uncertainty about him; he walks straight up to him and asks, ‘Are you *friend or foe?*’

The answer is just as startling *"Neither one," he replied. "I am the commander of the LORD's army."*

Joshua had asked what anyone would want to know. “Are you for us, or against us? On our team, or their team.” The Lord’s response is literally, ‘**No**’. ‘Neither one’. ‘**I’ve not come to be under you but over you.**’

We aren't told much about how Joshua processed this – just that he **knew it was He**. That happens, sometimes. You are **in the**

presence of the Lord, and **you don't quite know it – but then suddenly you do know it.**

- Joshua knew that the one who met Moses in the burning bush, the great 'I am' had come, sword drawn.
- Joshua knew right then and there that all his own plans for this military campaign could be laid down because the Commander had come, sword drawn.
- Joshua knew right then and there that the terrible burden of leadership had been lifted from his shoulders, because the Commander had come, sword in hand.

In his presence Israel's general and Moses' successor became a buck private.

At this, Joshua fell with his face to the ground in reverence. "I am at your command," Joshua said. "What do you want your servant to do?"

The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did as he was told.

Joshua 5.14-15

It is **the signal mark of real leadership.** Joshua stands in the presence of the Lord, and bows. They go there often, and bow their heads and ask, 'What do you want your servant to do?' The answer comes back, 'Take off your shoes in my presence'. That is **the first thing to do** – before all the other things that must be done. Always the first thing to do.

That is **the mark of leaders who can be trusted** – leaders who can be followed - That is true for any kind of leader in any kind of opportunity – for leaders in the church, for leaders at home, for leaders in the corporate sector, for leaders in communities and schools and charitable agencies. They go often into the presence of the Lord and bend their head and take off their shoes and listen to what they are told...

That is the kind of leadership that will lead us into God's future, with all its challenges, all its dangers, all its opportunities.

That **why they stopped** for those weeks at Gilgal.

To make sure they were...

People who had been with the Lord and had taken off their shoes and bowed their heads... who are cut free from their past and forgiven, formed and fed and led-

By leaders who had been with the Lord and had taken off their shoes and bowed their heads... who are cut free from their past and forgiven, formed and fed and led...

That is worth stopping for.