

Joshua 5:9-12

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 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.*

The Problem of New Beginnings - March 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9-12

Finally, they arrived! Finally, the promise and dreams and come true! At long last, at long, long last, the children of Israel had come home!

Consider what they had been through. For forty years, they had been wandering in the Sinai desert. Now if you look at a map of Israel and Egypt, the Sinai desert is not a terribly large territory. In fact it's only about one hundred miles to get from what is now the Suez Canal to the border of Israel. It could easily be walked in less than a month even with a huge group of people, their possessions and their animals.

Yet for forty years the people of Israel just stayed in the desert, camping here, camping there, finding various oases to just stay at for awhile. Why didn't they go directly?

Well, that was the plan, originally. The problem with the Israelites was that when they left Egypt to return to Israel, they were a nation of slaves. Consider what that means because it is a powerful barrier for the people back then, and even today.

We don't have slavery, at least officially, in our country. But we still have plenty of oppression, racism, and keeping people down. Consider what it would mean if you were told from your birth that you were inferior. Consider what it would be like to be prevented from learning and even told you were incapable of learning. Consider what it would be like to be prevented from thinking for yourself or acting for yourself. Consider thinking of yourself as a loser all your life.

None of these things can be forgotten easily, it at all. Slavery leaves physical scars on the body, and it leaves mental scars on the mind. Make no mistake, the inequities that our nation has enforced against women, against minorities, against LGBTQ people, against immigrants, against poor people, sick people, old people, against Jews, Muslims, and so many other faiths — all these leave their scars on the mind which are not easy to forget. When you've been taught since birth that you are inferior, then a part of you is going to believe it, even when another part of you knows it's not true.

For over 400 years, the Israelites were slaves in the land of Egypt. They were forced to work as they were told and were made to be dependent on the Egyptians for everything. Egypt did its best to suck the life out of Israel. It was only their faith in God that kept them from giving up. But while their faith prevented them from being destroyed, they were nonetheless damaged.

They found out how damaged they were right after they left Egypt. You see, the plan was for Israel to march across the Sinai desert into the promised land, a journey of just a few weeks. But, when they got to the promised land, all their fears, all their insecurities, all the oppression of 400 years caught up with them. Instead of marching confidently into the Promised Land, knowing that their God was with them, they gave up. They didn't even try to enter the Promised Land. They were afraid. They believed they were inferior. They knew they would lose, even though God had told them otherwise.

For the Israelites, the only solution was to remain not in Egypt (where some wanted to go), nor in Israel (where they were supposed to go), but to stay in the desert and wait, and grow, and change, so they could finally begin again.

It took forty years in the desert to recondition the Israelites from being a nation of fearful slaves to being a nation of confident warriors capable of conquering the Promised Land with God's help. Israel was at the boarder finally under the command of Joshua. They were ready to enter and mark the new beginning of Israel being the masters of the land instead of the slaves. They were ready to believe the promises of their God and ready to fight, win, and control their new land.

They were ready, but it had taken over 400 years to get there. Nonetheless, while God stopped the manna and the people were able to grow their own crops, we don't know whether the Israelites were prepared to conquer the Promised Land or, once again, would they lose their nerve and retreat.

You have also heard today the story of the Prodigal Son, as it's commonly called. Another name for it is the parable of the Forgiving Father, or even the parable of the Angry Brother. A young man receives a large sum of money from his father and promptly runs away and spends it all. Whether he felt genuinely sorry or was just looking for a free meal, he returns home to move in with his father again.

Without asking why or asking proof of his son's sincerity, the father welcomes the boy back and throws a huge party. In the meantime, the boy's older brother, who never caused any problems for his father, hears the news and gets angry. He can't understand why his brother is welcome. He can't understand why the younger brother gets to come home with no consequences. The Father invites the older brother in to celebrate with the family, but at the end of the story, we don't know whether the brother decides to accept the new situation and celebrate or whether he rejects his brother and remains apart from him.

These stories have a lot in common because they are both about new beginnings. More specifically, the problems that accompany new beginnings.

Now wait, aren't new beginnings supposed to be good? Why would we want to associate problems with new beginnings?

Friends, for most people, new beginnings are not always good things, in fact quite the opposite. New beginnings spell trouble for many of us because new beginnings are all about change. And let's face it, few people like to change — whether it's considered a bad change or even if it's a good change.

For the Israelites entering the promised land, everything for them was about to change. Now they had no choice but to attack and take the land. God had cut off their free food called manna. They now had to raise their own. The free water was gone. They had to dig their own wells. They now had to find out whether they had the courage to move forward believing that their God was with them.

And that's scary. So many questions with so few answers. Sure, there was a new generation of Israelites who did not know what slavery was. Sure, they were healthy and strong and had survived in the desert for forty years. Sure they had practice living under God's Laws and God's plan. But would that be enough? Would the plan work?

The older brother of the prodigal son was facing his own choice of making a new beginning. Obviously as the older brother he was used to a certain amount of independence and respect — you might even call it entitlement. For years he in fact had been the keystone of his family, raising the family crops and looking after the family herd. For years he was able to look down on his foolish younger brother, directing his anger and hatred toward the boy.

But now, the older brother gets the shock of his life. The useless younger brother was back and their father was welcoming him! Welcoming him! Impossible. How could the father show anything but contempt and hatred toward the boy! Yet, in the mind of the older brother, all he could see was his foolish father reaching out and welcoming his foolish brother. Total madness! What is going on? The last thing in the world, it seems, the older brother wanted was a new beginning. He didn't want any kind of beginning. The older brother just wanted his younger brother to go away so he could get back to hating his brother in peace.

Friends, every week in our worship, we offer something called the prayer of confession. We use the printed words and add on our own admissions that we have fallen short, way short, of God's intentions for us. And at the end of the prayer comes the Assurance of Pardon, reminding us once again of God's gracious choice to forgive us and allow us the opportunity — yet again — to make a new beginning. That is really the heart of our Christian experience, isn't it? We worship a God who is interested not in recalling the past, but in making for us a new and better future.

But here's the fundamental question. The question for Israel, the question for the angry brother, and the question for us. Do we want, do we really want a new beginning? Frankly, I'm not sure Israel, the older brother, or even we want a new beginning.

Why not? It seems obvious, it seems desirable, but is it? Beginnings are not only about change, about doing something new, looking toward the future, beginnings are also about dealing with the past.

For whatever problems we are dealing with now, at least we know them. We know our pasts, or at least we think we do. For many of us it is far easier and far more comfortable to deal with and live in a past we know than to take the risks associated with a future we don't know and may well not want to know.

When Israel was entering the promised land, they were surrendering everything that was familiar to them — everything, that is, except their God. Their entire way of life was about to change, from how they dressed to how they lived to where they lived to what they ate — so very much.

For the angry older brother, his life was going to change whether he accepted the return of his younger brother or not. Regardless of how he felt, the younger brother, the prodigal son, was going to be there. However, the angry brother had the choice to accept the new reality or spend his life with his anger. Frankly, we all know many people who choose to be angry instead of forgive.

For ourselves, so many of us live in fear, in dread of what is going to happen next. We can be paralyzed with fear. When we ask God for forgiveness, we may hear the words we are forgiven, but we don't believe them. Somehow it is easier to spend our lives in guilt and self-hatred rather than start on a new pathway freed from our old ways of thinking and being.

Even us, even this Collingswood congregation is dealing with a new beginning. What will our future be? How will we deal with it? This is our choice and it is a choice every member will have to make.

Friends, throughout the Bible, throughout history, our God has always been the creating, life-giving God, bringing new life from death and always willing to help us start over. This Lenten season is all about our reaffirming our faith in the Christ who conquered death in all its forms so we can believe that new life and new beginnings for us are not only possible but God's plan and God's reality. As Christians, we should not fear the future, we should not fear change, we should not fear tomorrow. With Jesus Christ, the author of life, on our side, we can embrace our new beginnings.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.