

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year C

RCL Readings – Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

ACNA Readings – Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:11-32

Introduction. We arrive into the fourth week of the Lenten season. For those of us that are fasting, we should remind ourselves that fasting is not the be-all and end-all of self-discipline. The goal is not to have a successful fast only, but to apply ourselves to be better disciples of Jesus through the spiritual activity of fasting. Like all things with faith, fasting will have both personal applications and outward results in the attitudes and dealings we have with others.

Common Theme. One of the themes of the readings this week focuses us on our flawed perceptions of ourselves and others. As followers of Jesus, we have an identity in God that is both personal to ourselves – we are ‘new creations’ – and applicable to our brothers and sisters in community as they too are ‘new creations’. During this Lent, we all need to resolve to see others and ourselves as God sees us.

Joshua 5:9-12. After the death of Moses, the Israelites are led by Joshua into the land of Canaan. The passage begins with the Lord declaring that he has removed their shame and identity as slaves of Egypt. How was the Israelite reproach removed? The Israelites had just crossed the Jordan and then circumcised themselves on the plains of Jericho. Mass incapacitation of yourselves through male circumcision on the eve of the battle of Jericho might not be the smartest military strategy, but it does demonstrate the faith and resolve of the Israelites. Circumcision was the physical rite associated with the covenant God made with Abraham. The Israelites who now entered the promised land were no longer to see themselves as slaves or even former slaves but as a covenant people chosen by a holy God. The first Passover recorded in the Bible preceded the Exodus from Egypt; the second one is recorded here as the Israelites leave the wilderness into the promised land. The celebration of the Passover binds the Israelites into the continuing story of God's ongoing work of redemption. They are reminded that whatever happens next, they are redeemed! And that is a good thing to truly know!

Psalms 32. The title of this psalm is a ‘Maskil’ to David. Traditionally the psalm is attributed to the hand of David although the Hebrew title could imply the psalm to have been a composition for him and not actually by him. Some commentators place the timing of the composition to occur after Psalm 51 when David confessed his iniquity to the Lord and promised to ‘teach transgressors your ways’. The theme of the psalm answers the question: who is truly happy? The answer: only those who know that their sins are forgiven are truly happy. The word for happy בָּרֵךְ, sometimes translated as *blessed*, is in the plural בָּרֵכְיֶם, hence it can be said that the happiness we receive through forgiveness occurs on multiple levels, both a physical and on a spiritual level. In verse 5, the psalmist reminds us that first there is confession, an acknowledgement of personal sin. During the liturgical prayers of a traditional church service, following the public confession of sin, there is the assurance of forgiveness. I personally find this one of the great pleasures of the Church, to announce the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the Lord to those who, with heartfelt repentance, have turned back to God. Many people come to worship the Lord, believing in Jesus, and yet do not feel assured of their forgiveness. The psalmist is emphatic when he declares: I have confessed my transgressions and you

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(God) have forgiven (literally *carried away*) my sins. We can be assured this Lent that we have the forgiveness of God, and perhaps we could share some of that assurance with each other.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21. Paul begins this passage with the instruction that, from now on, we will not view the identity of others through the values and standards of this world, as if people's present physical condition is all that matters. In the Messiah, we are all 'new creations'. This is not something done for us but in us. This spiritual work in us changes our inward and outward identity. If we even begin to think that this new identity in the Messiah came from anything we accomplished, Paul emphatically declares that 'this is all from God' through the Messiah who gave everyone the 'ministry of reconciliation'. Reconciliation, *καταλλαγή*, is a unique expression of Paul in the New Testament, occurring here and in his Epistles to the Romans, Ephesians and Colossians. It has the meanings of *adjusting a difference, restoration of favour, and atonement*. Our response to this great work of the Lord is to act as his witnesses of his faithfulness, love, and mercy and to share the Good News. Or in Paul's words, to be 'ambassadors for Christ'.

Verse 21 is an extremely important verse for understanding the work of reconciliation or atonement done by Jesus. Paul writes that in the act of atonement, Jesus who knew no sin 'became sin'. The underlying Greek word here is *ἁμαρτία*, *hamartia*, which serves in the Septuagint (Greek version of the Hebrew Bible) as the word for both sin (*ἁμαρτία*) and sin offering (*ἁμαρτία*). Most English translations choose to use the word *sin* in this passage with a footnote saying it could also be rendered *sin offering*. I personally think the right reading here is *sin offering*. Behind Paul's argument is the idea of the unblemished scapegoat that takes away the sin of the world, the highlight of the Yom Kippur service. Note that the goat is unblemished and while taking the sins of Israel upon itself, the goat itself remains unblemished. I think that if God ever became 'sin', the creation order would collapse. It's my argument that God was reconciling the world to himself by making himself the sin offering, not making himself sin. Perhaps this is something we can all focus our contemplations this Lent as we seek to see each other as the Lord sees us, which is worthy to be reconciled!

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32. The Gospel passage begins by describing the popularity that the Jesus movement was having among the segment of the community identified as tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors to the Jewish community and in league with the Roman occupation, and they were lumped in together with 'sinners' as the outcasts of society. The fact is we are all sinners, but in the eyes of the Pharisees, that identity belonged to those they deemed less rigorous than themselves in keeping the rituals of the Law. Table fellowship with such people was abhorrent because the sinners' uncleanness would contaminate the Pharisees. Before we throw stones from a house of glass, we should admit that we have all too often fallen into this trap. We sometimes look at other denominations of the Christian Church with some inferiority and perhaps even disdain. The calling of Israel was to be a light to the nations. There is a familiar saying that says 'charity begins at home', meaning that instead of criticizing the 'sinners', the Pharisees should have felt compassion with the desire to 'save' them.

Jesus then teaches the very familiar parable of the Lost Son, unique to Luke's Gospel, to highlight self-righteous attitudes and challenge the self-perception of the Pharisees. In the parable, we see the

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love of the father who loves both his sons, both the one who stayed and the one who strayed. Unfortunately, the son who stayed could not see the son who strayed in the same love that his father did. Perhaps this reveals that, in some way, he too is just as lost as his brother. The prodigal son, upon his return to the father's house, confesses that he has indeed sinned against both heaven and the father. That is, his offence is against both God and Man! In his repentance, he wanted to identify himself as one of the servants and not a family member. This was never how the father viewed his lost son. To the father, the disobedient son was always a son. As we continue to journey toward Holy Week during this Lenten season, let us take to heart the teaching of the parable, to see ourselves and each other as the loving Father sees us.

ACNA Reading

Psalm 34. The context of the psalm is included in the title, which connects this psalm to the events in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David had been a fugitive from Saul and found refuge with the Philistines. He survived by feigning madness in the presence of the King Achish of Gath. The reference to Abimelech is probably a title given to the Philistine kings. The psalm is an expression of thanksgiving and praise for God's protection for those who trust in him. David invites all the humble to join him in magnifying the Lord. Rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, it doesn't matter for all can and should be humble before God. The psalm reminds us that the Angel of the Lord defends those who fear the Lord and that the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. Too often we measure ourselves and others by the standards of the world, by our socioeconomic status, our education or lack thereof, and the quality of our friendship circles. This psalm reminds us of the character the Lord truly seeks: those who are humble, who fear God and bless his name. Those are who God calls righteous. This is an identity we can all have and one that we can invite others into.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.