

“Finding Strength in Unfamiliar Territory”  
March 30, 2025

Joshua 5:10-12  
Luke 15:11-32

Let us pause for a moment today to remember what this season of Lent is all about.

As you know, our word “Lent” comes from the Old English word that means “to lengthen.” It is a name that speaks to us of the lengthening of days, the return of the sun to our hemisphere during these weeks before our joyful celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday. Lent is the time of increasing light, the days of experiencing God’s warm mercy.

Several centuries ago, when Lent was observed with more fasting and penitence than it is today, this fourth Sunday of Lent was referred to as “Refreshment Sunday.” It was a little celebration in the midst of the strictures of the season. It was a day on which the Lenten disciplines would be relaxed, a time when apprentices who lived far from home would return to visit with their families.

We Congregationalists have never been all that big on special seasons and days. We’ve been marking Lent for only the past hundred years or so. In the simplicity that is one of our hallmarks, we prefer to regard each Sunday as a little Easter, a celebration of the resurrection. Still, I confess that I like the idea of Refreshment Sunday. I think that all us can use a day like that. We can use a time to let up on ourselves, to turn our hearts and our lives once more toward the God from whom all blessings flow.

So perhaps, on this day, we can turn our sights, not to the demanding God or the judging God of Lenten stereotypes, but to the God made known to us in the Hebrew scriptures and incarnate in Jesus Christ: the God of abundant generosity, more ready to give than to demand, more ready to forgive than to condemn.

We find this God in unfamiliar territory. And in unfamiliar places we also find the strength that God offers us for these days.

Sooner or later, life takes most of us into unfamiliar territory—places we’ve never been, situations that are unknown.

Maybe you were looking for the right school and found yourself heading out of state, to Iowa of all places!

Maybe you were offered just the right job and moved to this distant city along the Iowa River.

Maybe you thought you’d stay here for a year or two, only to find that, decades later, this unfamiliar territory is actually home.

Even if you've lived *here* your entire life—my guess is that sometime, you've found yourself in unknown territory: the strange, uncharted landscape of marriage or parenthood or retirement or illness or unemployment.

The book of Joshua gives an account of the Hebrew people entering the Promised Land. There is much in this book that is harsh, violent, and disturbing.

But at the beginning of this book, we are told that “the manna ceased.” This is a short reminder of God's care for the people in the past and a statement of how that providence was transformed in a new situation. We hear about people finding strength in unfamiliar territory.

Remember what happened in the wilderness.

The people left slavery in Egypt. Finding themselves on the other side of the Red Sea, they began to think that captivity wasn't so bad after all. At least in Egypt they had all the bread they could eat! In the wilderness, they were pretty sure they were going to starve.

We're haunted by a sense of scarcity.

Both of the sons in the parable Jesus told were obviously doing all right. And yet both wanted as much as they could get. Both were concerned exclusively about their own well-being.

They aren't very different from the people wandering in the desert—or from us.

“Don't worry”—God tells the worried Moses.

The people go out in the morning and look around. Fine flakes appear on the ground.

"*Man-hu*?" the people ask in Hebrew. "What is that?" *Man-hu*. Manna.

Those who study such things tell us that these flakes were most likely the excretion of two scale-insects that feed on the twigs of the tamarisk tree.

Moses tells the questioning people, this is your bread. Actually, it is their *daily* bread—as it turns out that it can't be hoarded or saved from one day to the next without rotting. But it is enough for the day.

Moses says: “This is the bread that God has given you.”

Manna. The word doesn't have any content. It's simply a question: “What is that?” The provision of God, the strength of God often just leaves us questioning, wondering. What is this that we have received? Is it what we asked for? Is it what we need, what we *want*?

On this strength, the people dwelt in uncertain territory for forty years.

And what was the first thing that happened when the people entered the Promised Land?

The manna ceased.

This sign of God's providential care in a time of great need ended. A new sign of God's care became apparent—the people ate the produce of the land of Canaan. A new situation presented new opportunities, gave new strength, and created new responsibilities.

From the time that the people entered the Promised Land up until today, bread no longer comes from heaven. But by faith we still affirm that our strength and our abundance comes from God.

John Calvin helped us see this when he wrote: “The fact that we ask for our bread to be *given* signifies that it is a gift, however it may come to us, even when it would seem to have been obtained from our own skills and diligence and supplied by our own hands. For it is by God's blessing alone that our labors truly prosper.”

The manna ceased, and we still know God's care, God's strength.

The manna ceased, and we still need to ask the question: “What *is* this that we have received?” How will we use what we have to increase the well-being of more people?

The stories that we read in scripture, like that of the Israelites coming into a new land, and like the story of the prodigal son, often speak of God's abundance and strength encountered in unfamiliar territory.

Jesus tells that now well-known and well-worn parable of the prodigal son. Its scenes have been sung about, acted out, painted, danced, and sculpted and yet it is never exhausted. Something about the original story continues to hold our attention. It speaks to our hopes for acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It tells us, if we have ears to listen, that our hopes have been met in the grace and mercy of God.

This parable endures because it all too often mirrors our own stories: children leave home, members leave a church; spouses leave one another all because a distant land seems far more attractive. We drift from one place to another. We look for fulfillment, for purpose in unfamiliar territory.

This young man gathered all that he had and traveled to a distant country. He seemed well-prepared for whatever might come his way. It seems so easy at first. Move away from family, cut yourself off from community, run from God—that always seems the way to get along. It happens often enough that when we hear this story it sounds familiar, plausible.

Wasting his fortune, facing famine and need, finding one of the worst jobs available—it was all enough to make him look at his life and come to himself—that is, he was able at last to own his life, the good and the bad; he was able at last to know what was important to him, what he valued and pursue that.

By the grace of God, in a distant country, in unfamiliar territory, we, too, might come to ourselves.

Realization is the beginning of repentance, of turning your life around. The wonderful message of Christianity is that anyone can repent. No one is so far away from God, no one is so cut off that they cannot head in a new direction and find the life that God desires for him or her.

How might we describe this hope?

A Muslim theologian once said that when we take one step toward God, God takes ten steps toward us. When we walk toward God, God is already running toward us. Jesus tells of a similar God.

We wouldn't have come up with such deep mercy and grace on our own. But when Jesus eats and drinks with outcasts we see a God who races to meet us when we turn and start on a new path, a way back home.

And then there are those of us who hang around, who don't run off to those unfamiliar places.

Which might be why so many of us are troubled by the parable of the Prodigal Son. A lot of good church-going people identify with the elder son. We stay around. We do what is expected. We keep things going. And then late in the day the welcome seems to go out to someone else.

"Hey, what about us?" we ask.

And we are told the good news that we might not have heard before: "All of this was yours, all along."

Community.

Sanctuary.

Wholeness.

A calling to serve God in the world.

All the abundance of God in times of grief, illness, despair.

It's all here, anytime you want it.

When the manna ceases, we are offered the fruit of the land.

You've got to wonder: what kind of world would it be, when it came to the basic scheme of things, if the good-for-nothings were treated the same as everyone else? What kind of world would it be if the recognition of those who work hard and do good deeds and make sacrifices was taken away and given to the prodigals?

What kind of world, indeed?

That appears to be the question that Jesus was asking in many of his parables. It may be the question that Jesus was asking with his life. Those who seek to live by merit can never know the joy of grace. Sharing in God's grace asks that we join in the celebration when others are the recipients of that grace also. Part of fellowship with Christ is receiving and rejoicing with others whom we are pretty sure do not deserve our forgiveness or God's grace—that is, with people very much like ourselves.

What kind of world would it be?

What kind of world is in the making as the realm of God interrupts our old moral order with grace and love and acceptance?

What kind of world would it be if we went along and joined in the singing and dancing, the feasting and rejoicing?

What kind of world would it be if we were a part of the celebration?

What kind of world, indeed?