Sermon **Joshua 5.9-12**
March 31, 2019 (7:45 service) **Psalm 32**
Lent 4C **2 Corinthians 5.16-21**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32**

This Sunday traditionally has been referred to as "Refreshment Sunday"... a slight lessening of the harsher, more penitential character of Lent. And, after a few weeks of on-again-off-again snow storms and basements flooding, "refreshment" does seem a somewhat apt description for our hope this time of year. Indeed, the readings from Scripture seem more upbeat -- lessons of hope and deliverance.

Joshua, leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land, repeats, in a less dramatic way, the Exodus event that originally constituted Israel -- one instance of making the old new. Psalm 32 speaks of forgiveness, restoration: refreshment. And, of course, the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son emphasizes a renewal of relationships gone bad. There is hope in these lessons; there is refreshment.

Hope, however, does not arise in a vacuum. Similarly, hope does not arise from hope. Unfortunate as it is, our lives do not go from one piece of good news to another, interrupted by periods of ecstasy, followed by quiet peace, suffused constantly by incessant happiness. On the contrary, hope arises out of despair and confusion -- out of seemingly increasing numbers of high school suicides, out of the darkness caused by acrimonious legislative debates, whether over the budget or immigration. Our lessons this morning reflect the movement from difficult straits to hope -- a vision, in the middle of Lent, of the joy that awaits us in a few weeks. Refreshment for a hungry people.

That is clearly one of the main themes of Jesus's famous parable of the wayward son. We know the story so well that it's almost like the old joke about prisoners telling jokes by the numbers -- "Remember number 17?" Uproarious laughter from adjacent cells. We hear, "There was a man who had two sons", and we know the rest. A boy, whose life has probably been pretty comfortable, decides to take his half of the inheritance and head out on his own. Relatively quickly, the story implies, after squandering his resources, he's down on his luck and eating pig slop. From comfort to chaos. And then he realizes that life on the farm wasn't so bad. He figuratively, and literally, turns around—he repents—from his self-induced chaos and returns to his home, where he is received with open arms (at least by his father). The chaos and hunger are behind; a fatted-calf party is in progress. Reconciliation with his father results in a new creation.

Psalm 32 tells a similar, while less dramatic, story. For some reason, the psalmist has found himself in distress, and recognized his own culpability, his own responsibility that led him down that dark road. Acknowledging that sinful past brought him forgiveness. Renewal. Re-fresh-ment.

Where I find this theme of re-creation, re-conciliation, or re-freshment most powerfully depicted is in the reading from Joshua, for it is there that several subtle nuances arise. Recall what has happened. The Israelites found themselves in bondage in Egypt. God heard their complaint, raised up Moses as a unique deliverer and prophet, who confronted the oppressor. The Israelites were finally released, and ultimately saved as they passed through the Red Sea. There it was that they really became the people of Israel—the old had passed away before their eyes. They were now on their own.

Moses led them to Sinai where their status as a unique people was "carved in stone", as it were. They committed themselves to God, and God to them. Yet, as we all know, they spent 40 years getting from Sinai to the Jordan. Why? They couldn't live up to the covenant they made. Even though God had delivered them and fed them (all that manna and those quail), they couldn't find it in themselves truly to become God's people.

Well, 40 years served to cull out that rebellious generation, and in this morning's reading we have the culmination. Moses had led the people to the Promised Land; Joshua led them in. Delivered from 40 years of wandering, they crossed through another body of water, got on dry land. Clearly a re-constitution of the people. All of the men who had left Egypt were dead; all the men who entered the Promised Land, therefore, needed to be circumcised (a story recounted in the verses immediately preceding those we just heard, but delicately left out of today's "refreshing" reading). Clearly a renewal of the covenant with Abraham. And then all the people ate the Passover—tasting and seeing that God was good. And no more did they eat manna, but rather the crops of Canaan. Refreshment.

This morning's lessons reflect this thematic movement. And, of course, these are not the only examples; they abound through Scripture. And, as that is the case, we ought pay attention. The movement to which I refer is that of the original creation-- from chaos to order. The chaos of the formless void to this beautiful, amazing ecosystem we call home. The chaos of oppression in Egypt to Red Sea deliverance. The chaos of desert wandering to the Passover celebration in the Promised Land. The chaos of being penniless and eating pig slop to being at home, well-fed, with family.

If there is not hope, if there is not refreshment in these lessons, then I'm not sure

we'll find it elsewhere. But . . . I mentioned nuances in connection with the reading in Joshua. Nuances that are also implied throughout Scripture. Chief among them lies in the question, "Why was Israel wandering for 40 years?" Why was there a second Red Sea crossing, a second circumcision? If you'll pardon the pun, the answer can be found in Luke's parable: "wanderlust." Like the younger son, Israel lusted to wander, and God granted them their wish.

In other words, we all fall from our initial creation as innocents. We wander from our homes—literally and figuratively—and we get in trouble. Sometimes it seems as if trouble simply seeks us out. We do not experience life as one big banquet, one big Promised Land. And when we think we do, we are most likely to forget that it is God who has given us all that we have—that it is God who created us. And so we need constantly to be re-created.

Remember that Luke's parable ends not with the happy banquet, but with the disgruntled elder brother. Younger son and father are going to have to deal with him. Israel may have crossed the Jordan, but they still have to claim the land. The pattern will repeat. Life is not static. What is now order will soon be chaos again. This morning's lessons, however, serve to remind us that there is hope; there is order again. Indeed, there may even be order in the chaos if we only look.

It is our common journey, seen here in Lent in miniature.

But God is good. God brings us from bland manna to the fat of the land. A foretaste of that is at this table in bread and wine. Food for the journey, yes. But also the feast of the present reign of God. The meal of the newly created, again and again

Refreshment.

Amen.