

The End of an Era

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Jessie]

Good morning my name is Jessie and I'm the children's parents are here at Artisan. This morning I have our 2nd reading and then in lieu of our children's moment we're going to have a baby dedication, which is really exciting. So kids you are going to stay with your grown ups this morning until it's time to be dismissed. Here is our 2nd reading this morning, it's from Luke Chapter 15 and it's the story commonly known as the Prodigal Son.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable... "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

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“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

[Voice of Kristin Brown]

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the Book of Joshua chapter 5 starting in verse 9: 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.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

This is the season of Lent, today, believe it or not, is the 4th Sunday in Lent, so that means that we are past the halfway point in this season, if you can believe that! As many of you know, but for those who don't know, Lent is the season that leads up to Easter and it's when we'll be celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. So, during this season of Lent it's typically a season of penitence and preparation. It's often marked by the practice of certain spiritual disciplines, especially fasting. And it's also a season that is traditionally characterized by acts of repentance. Now, most of you, when you hear the word repentance, you're thinking about like the idea of, of confessing a wrong-doing, admitting your sins, deciding to turn to God if you've turned away from God. And all of that is good, all of those... well I would eat it, you're never going to hear me, as a pastor, say no don't bother to confess your sins. But! Lent is often, as a result, kind of a somber season.

And as I was doing some word studying leading up to the season I was reminded that the, the literal definition of the Greek word that is translated to repentance is simply changing one's mind. And so we decided that this season of Lent, this year, in 2019, the theme for Lent would

be “change your mind”. And although I've been trying to acknowledge always that changing your mind can be a difficult and even a painful task, my reminder to you each week has been--will continue to be--that changes in our understanding are very often the way that God works in us and God works through us. If you see, if you never change your mind about anything, you're, you're kind of, it's almost like you're, you're less useful to God with each passing day and each passing year. That kind of ossification of your your mental state, your perspectives about God, it makes it harder, I think, for God to work through us when we are unwilling to ever have our minds changed. And so we've used this key verse from Romans 12, and if we could put that on the screen, I want everybody to say at least the 2nd half of this verse together with me. A very famous verse in the New Testament, some of you have already memorized it, but I hope that the rest of you who have been with us, at least, have memorized the 2nd half of it, and I hope that all of you will have it memorized before we leave today. It's pretty simple, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” OK, go to the next slide. “Do not be conformed to this world but...” [congregation finishes the verse together].

I think we hit 100 percent. Very good job, very good job.

So, today I want to look at two of the Bible stories that the lectionary gives us on the 4th Sunday in Lent, this year, and my hope is that these stories will help us to understand the idea of spiritual change and to embrace the idea of spiritual change, despite the challenges and despite the pain that might be present with it.

So, the first story is that story from the Hebrew Bible reading from the Old Testament book of Joshua and we just heard that right a moment ago. We've talked recently here at Artisan about how the Israelites who escaped from captivity in Egypt were not the ones who ultimately got to enter the Promised Land. We've talked also about how Moses, the leader and prophet who led God's people out of captivity in Egypt, was not the leader who would lead the people into the Promised Land; there were some acts of disobedience along the way that were result, that resulted in this prohibition from that first generation going in. Ultimately, it would be Joshua, Moses' successor, who would lead the people, this second generation of Israelites, into the promised land, and the Book of Joshua tells that story.

Now, there are a number of events that happened as the people are getting ready to take possession of this promised land. Not all of them are pretty, by the way there is some bloodshed of more than one type. I don't have time to go into all of that story, anyway, but one

of the offense that I found really poignant is right in the passage that we heard read a few moments ago. Did you catch this?

First, the people observe the Passover in their camp. Now, those of you who maybe know the story a little bit better, know that that means that this is an anniversary of when they have left Egypt. The Passover was the remembrance of that last plague that, that a lot, that let Pharaoh relent, the caused Pharaoh to relent and let the people go, at least for a little while, and that's how they finally were able to leave Egypt. But then, after they observe the Passover, Joshua 5:11: "On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain." Now why is this significant? Well, because they've been wandering in this desert wilderness for 40 years, produce has not been an option for them during that time. What they've been eating is this special miraculous provision of God called manna, which literally means "what is that?" because they woke up one morning and found this flaky stuff on the ground and Moses is like: "that's your food." And they were like: "no, no really, "what is that?" "No, that's your food." And this was the food that the people had for this time in the wilderness. They would gather every morning, they would eat it throughout the day, they would go to bed, they'd wake up the next day, there would be, they had exactly enough to provide for them one day's food, until the Sabbath came, and they would get 2 days food so they wouldn't have to do the work of gathering on the Sabbath. And that was their provision, that was their, their sign that God was with them, that was the way they fed themselves and their families in the wilderness.

And so to be on the edge of the promised land and to eat the produce of the land! How many of you think, "well that's pretty good. That must have been really awesome"? But, here's the key verse that, at least for me, the one that really leapt off the page is verse 12. The very next sentence says: "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." Yes, all well and good, except remember how I said there's a series of things that happen before they enter the Promised Land? We're only like a little way through that list. They're eating into the produce of the land that's maybe the leftovers or whatever. They're on the edge of the land, they haven't taken the city yet, they don't have any guarantee that they're going to, they are being forced in this moment to trust in God's continued provision for them in the coming year. Now we see that, you know, the spoiler alert is that they ate the produce of the land that year but they don't know that yet, all they might know is that the manna ceased. They woke up the next day and said: "uh, where is that?" It was gone. Think about how monumental a change this must have been for the people! For four decades this was their, their food source. It wasn't fancy, but it was always there. And it was the reminder for them every day when they woke up, undeniably, that God was there with them. And now they're about to make their way into a

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new land. And they've had one good meal. They have some big things to do and they wake up and the manna isn't there.

By the way, that new food source is agriculture. Guess what, agriculture requires? A lot of work! Have you ever had a garden? I haven't. You know why? Because I've seen those of you who do.

[Laughter]

I don't have time for that! But, also, it relies on some luck. You've got to have rain, you got to make sure that the locusts don't come through... And they have a huge battle to fight and win before they can start to plant their seeds for the coming year. This is going to be an entirely new way of life for the Israelites. They're not just changing the paint color, this is their food source, this is everything, this is their sustenance. It was one way and then it stopped and we don't know what's coming next, necessarily. Sometimes we reach a point in our journey through life where the old ways don't work anymore. The company goes bankrupt. The job gets replaced by automation. Your parents say you have to move out. Your spouse says you have to move out. You sing the hymns and the songs but they don't bring you joy anymore. The praises go up and the blessings do not come down. The prayers get old and stale and they crack. The answers dry up. You go to read the Bible to find the peace that it's always given you, to find the spiritual meaning that you've always found there, and you find none and you begin to wonder if you even want spiritual meaning anymore. Am I talking to anybody in the room, right now?

Do you see, now, why each week I've been careful to say, "yes change your mind", but also to acknowledge that changing your mind isn't necessarily going to be easy and it isn't necessarily going to be pleasant. Here's what I want you to know: God was with you before your mind started to change, God is with you while you are changing your mind, God will be there with you after the change is complete. Sometimes the manna stops, sometimes it stops before the next thing starts. And when that happens it can feel like God has taken it away from us to test us or to torture us. It can feel like God wasn't real in the first place. But, this is my belief: that the manna only stops when something new is about to begin. And with the benefit of a few years, sometimes when, when the manna stops in my life, in one way or another, not always, but sometimes I'm reminded that this is probably a time for me to be on the lookout for what that new and better thing is. You may not be able to recognize it as such until much later. You know, "the labor of God is to trust". Whenever we sing that song, every time we sing that song, it hits me: "the labor of God is trust", from the Book of John.

So, this idea that we're engaging with during Lent, that this embrace of spiritual transformation by the renewing of our minds, I think it's worth noting and recognizing and admitting that this is

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not going to be a perfect and gentle slope from where we started out to this utopic, um utopian perfect understanding at the end of whatever. That perfect slope, it just doesn't exist. You can, you can draw a line between the two things later, but in the meantime, there's a lot of up and down that sometimes will feel like, that the taking, you know, you make you way two feet forward and you take one foot back.

Some of you, some of you may feel an actual spiritual terror at the idea that you would embrace changing your mind about God, not because you just fear change--although some of you do, right, and I do too--not because you just fear change, but because you can see it coming, you're beginning to see it take shape, you're starting to identify what the change of mind actually is, and you're starting to realize that this is a change of mind that it sure seems like it's going to take you farther from God, not closer to God. And in that situation you can get scared, it's frightening. You might say to yourself: "uhh, maybe I won't change my mind, I'm kind of good with what I have right now." Avoid the temptation, my friends, that leads to fundamentalism and worse.

I know the pain that you are afraid of, I know, I know the challenge and the fear of that idea that you're changing your mind in a way that sure seems like it's pulling you farther away, not drawing you closer in. I know it because it's happened to me. What I don't know is any way around it. I think you just have to go through. But, here's what I can offer you as reassurance: for some people, not for all people, but for some people, it's the only path to God, the path away. It seems so counterintuitive, it seems so frightening, and it's so hard to trust God as you make your way away from God--or so it would seem--but for some of you, I'm just going to tell you, it's the only way back to God.

And for those of you who are in that group and, maybe even more so, for those of you who love and care for people who are in that group, I offer you the parable of the prodigal son. This story that we heard in our children's moment earlier--if you were at the 9 AM service, we didn't have the children's moment in this particular service--but, the story of the prodigal son that Jesus told, this parable that he told when? What had just happened? The religious people had said, "oh man he is really hanging around with the wrong people!" And then he tells a couple of parables in Luke 15 and then he tells a third story, which is the parable of the Prodigal Son.

And what that story tells us is that God, our loving parent, will never stop loving him. That God, our loving parent, will never stop waiting for us. That God will never give up on us even when we give up on God. Even when the change that's stirring in our soul is something along the lines of asking for our inheritance and getting out of town. What you need to know, what that parable teaches us is that it doesn't matter how far you stray, it doesn't matter how badly you

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act while you are away, you do stupid th... what the text says about the the son who left: “he squandered his property in dissolute living.” That's a very sterile way of saying he spent it all on whiskey and women.

[Laughter]

It gets a little more specific later in the passage, the brother seems to have some inside information. He got letters apparently.

[Laughter]

The son squandered his property in dissolute living, and yet when he returned, the father was still waiting for him. He was already out on the edge of the property, scanning the horizon for this one who was lost. And when the child returned, the father didn't say “oof, why don't you get a shower!” The father didn't show any sign of anger. The father didn't say, “well, I'm waiting, where's my apology?” The father said, “go get the robe, get the best robe, we're going to put it on this filthy body! Go get a ring, we're going to put it on the hand that was feeding the unclean animals!” Do you think it was an accident that Jesus had the son feeding the pigs? I don't think that was an accident at all. Remember the question, the accusation that had just been made to him. The son was feeding the unclean animals and tempted to eat their food. The father was waiting for him when he returned with open arms and love and forgiveness and a feast! He laid that table out, put the best food on it, and he even got that whiny, holier-than-thou, goody-two-shoes older brother to come into the feast too--and some of you all are that person. I was a firstborn--it doesn't matter how far you've strayed or will stray. Families and friends, spouses, siblings, it doesn't matter how far the one you love has strayed, it doesn't matter what they've done. When they make their way back, God will be waiting for them--God will be waiting for you--with open arms, with a robe and a ring and a feast.

You may be that prodigal son, now, you may be ready to return, this might be the day for you. You may be the one who's earlier in the story and here you're terrified right now because you're getting ready to leave. If it's any consolation, if it's any peace to you, to know that God will be here, if you ever make your way back. If that releases you to do what you need to do. You might be the resentful, resentful older sibling.

Here's the thing about feasts: we're all invited, but there is just the one table. This is the table not of the church but of the Lord, to be made ready for those who seek him here. And it's his will that those who are seeking him would find him here. And so I invite each one of you, whether you are a member of this church or not, whether you are a member of any church at all or not, whether you have strayed far, whether you have stayed close, whether you are the

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bitter older one or the repentant younger one or any one in between, this table is for you and for us. So, as we sing, I invite you to come and receive this sacramental means of grace, this body and blood, may it be the real presence of Jesus the Savior for you. May it be an experience of God's great unending love for you. May it be food for your hungry souls. May it be manna, may it be produce and may it be God's provision for your needs today. If you feel far from God and are not ready to return, you are still welcome in this place, you do not need to pretend and come to this table, it's open for you if you want it, but if you prefer to stay where you are, you are welcome to do that. If you'd like to receive prayer at this time, we have a member of the prayer team in the back corner of the room, you can go and receive prayer today. And for those who have children in our children's ministry, you can get them either before or right after you take communion whatever is better for your family. Our table is open. Let's continue to worship God in sacraments and song. I invite you to come. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com