

becoming

This is the fourth Sunday in our journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem. We began in the wilderness considering how he was faced with the temptations and challenges to prove his identity as God's anointed through the use of power to satisfy physical hunger or personal pride. The Lenten journey is also for us to consider the temptations and challenges which we face and how we respond to them in the light of the call that we have to be followers of Jesus. The psalmist who wrote our psalm of the day already knows our God. Like us, the psalmist is proclaiming the news that we will celebrate on Easter morning—for we—even during this Lenten Season already know the good news of what awaits beyond the arrival in Jerusalem—we know that we are among those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy, blessed indeed. The lectionary selection from the Hebrew scripture for this morning is a brief text from the beginning of the book of Joshua. In it the Lord says to Joshua, "Today, I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." (Joshua 5:9). The Israelites have crossed the Jordan, captured Jericho and God has required them to have been circumcised according to the covenant practices established with Abraham as the sign of their status within the covenant. They have now entered the Promised Land, and will celebrate now their first Passover there, the ritual to remind them of their rescue by God. This statement about the disgrace of Egypt occurs between the circumcision ritual and the celebrating of the Passover—so what disgrace has been rolled away? Because of the reference to Egypt, some associate it with their status of being slaves. Yet throughout their history and the scriptures God continually reminds the people of Israel that they are to remember their past. It is because of it they are to care for the alien resident among them. The people who crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land are the descendants of those who left Egypt—as a group they have spent some forty years wandering in the desert. Those people who left Egypt kept grumbling and looking back—they longed for the ways of the Egyptians—they wanted to keep worshipping the idols they had known there—they were not obedient to the ways of the God who was liberating them as God revealed them. So they spent forty years in the wilderness becoming the chosen people of God. That disobedience was the disgrace of Egypt that God rolled back and the people committed to being obedient to the covenant and promised to serve only God through the ritual of circumcision. In this ritual they were proclaiming that their identity was to be God's chosen people. Of course, it doesn't take much further reading of the history of this relationship to understand on which side of the covenant agreement there is faithfulness, and on which side of the covenant there is a lack of obedience. Our gospel reading from Luke opens with two verses describing people around Jesus—people who are like people always seem to be throughout history—people who can be seen as on a journey or in terminology of our times—people who are involved in a process: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." In the preceding chapters there has been no singling out of tax collectors as a group coming to Jesus, but there have been repeated calls for a need for repentance and lifestyle among those who would follow him so both crowd descriptions need to be heard as being valid. Jesus has been healing and teaching. Crowds have come, gathered to hear what this man who can heal, who can bring wholeness, who can cast out demons has to say. And

among those who come to hear, there are those who are evidently still very much like those just entering the wilderness with Moses—they are grumbling about what he is doing. They are looking around at others and making judgments about what he is doing and who is in the crowd with them—they are not looking at their own behaviors to see just what that is being said might apply to them. But what is Jesus' response to this criticism. "So he told them this parable." Actually what follows is three parables about lost things—a single lost sheep, one out of a hundred, a lost coin; one of ten and a lost son. The text which we read this morning is the well known from Sunday School story of the Prodigal Son. Many interpretations of this parable focus on the son who is first mentioned. The younger son goes to his father and asks to receive his inheritance early—before his father's death. The father grants this request and the son then leaves home, taking all that he has and goes to a distant country where he squandered his property in dissolute living. Many sermons and lessons have focused on this aspect—that dissolute living—assuming the issue to be a moral one—that the "lostness" described has to do with this behavior of the younger son. But the narrative itself doesn't seem that interested in what constituted the dissolute living—just that in conjunction with the famine that took place throughout the country, this young man began to be in need. It wasn't just the way he was living, but that coupled with the famine which necessitated him finding a way to support himself. Like all parables, there are many layers, so it isn't exactly a misinterpretation to question the dissolute living or draw a moral lesson from the parable, but neither is that necessarily the whole story. To those who heard this story, the fact that the means of support this younger son found involved the feeding of pigs would have added an especially abhorrent level to his condition. That does not really register with us because we don't recognize the dietary restrictions and cleanliness regulations of the Jewish traditions but is another indication of the multifaceted nature of all of Jesus' parables and indicates the extreme alienation he was experiencing. The narrative then continues with the young man's realizing that the pigs seemed to be getting fed better than he was. At this point in the parable it says, "But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hand have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!'" That phrasing is interesting—when he came to himself. That caught my attention. It was like since he had made that request of his father and left his home, he had been in the process of becoming something other than himself. He had left his home, gone to a distant land and lived in a different manner—in keeping with the theme of the being lost—it seems he had lost himself. If you consider this parable as the story of the young man's journey into the distant land as the story of how separations often happen—of how sometimes it is easy to make choices like he did in asking for his inheritance—and how one unwise choice can lead to other unwise decisions—like whatever those behaviors described as dissolute living were which led to the squandering of his property—all these events have led him to a place where he did not intend to go. And in this last instance, it is also a narration of how an awareness begins which leads to a reorientation—a realization that the current location is not what was planned at the beginning of the journey which then becomes the starting place for a new direction—going home in this parable. When he reaches that point and makes the decision to return home, before he actually sets off, he seems to practice an appeal for his father's forgiveness: "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." And he goes home and he does indeed give

this speech to his father. But the speech isn't necessary. He is still "far off" when his father sees him and is filled with compassion. His father doesn't stand and wait for him to come and give the speech, but runs and greets him, putting his arms around him and kissing him, welcoming him home. Even as the speech of contrition is being given, the returning son is given the best robe, a ring and sandals and preparations for a celebration are begun. But the parable does not end with the celebration's beginning. There was another son, the older son who had remained at home. The narrative continues as he returns from the field and witnesses this welcome that his brother is receiving—his unworthy brother. When he learns what has happened he is angry and refuses to even go in. The father again is the one who come to the son seeking to unite the family. It is this older son who elaborates judgmentally on possible details of how the younger son had squandered the property by dissolute living. The older son now complains the father has never given him the resources to throw a party for his friends. The father replies to this, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Even though the older son had never physically left to go to a distant land, evidently there was a space—a distance felt in the relationship if he did not understand that he could have had that celebration for his friends. It is clear that in this parable, the father in the narrative represents God—for God is truly welcoming the lost when they return—and the welcome gift of grace is abundant and generous as is this portrayal in the parable. But perhaps we should also take note of the opening verses of the audience—the tax collectors and sinners probably appear as the younger son but the Pharisees and the scribes who grumble may also appear in the role of the older son. And God reaches out to them both. Which brings me to the thought that begin my journey through the lectionary passages this week: 2nd Corinthians 5: 16—"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view", and verse 17: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" I wish. If those statements were true, God's kingdom would be present here on earth. If we could no longer look at each other from a human point of view but through the eyes of our Lord...what a difference it would make. If in my discipleship, if in my following of Christ, I could in truth become a true image of the one I follow, if I were indeed a new creation who could love as I have been commanded to love...how differently would I be able to speak and act...But that is what I think some of this Lenten journey is about...it is about the discipline of discipleship...of becoming...and of being thankful that as the psalmist proclaimed so long ago. Happy and blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven; whose sin is covered. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.