

The Prodigal God

Today I have rolled away the shame of your slavery in Egypt. —Joshua 5:9

Way back in the sixties, The Who sang about it, and they hoped they'd die, before they got old. When Green Day re-mixed it, they threw in a keg of Heineken to ease the pain. And when Limp Bizkit rapped about it, they turned it into a hip-hop ode to apathy.

My Generation. The pure Zen Now-ness of it. A present that just springs into existence, an all-day pass, a great long wooden roller-coaster of a ride that takes you, wild and free, into a world where, as Limp Bizkit sang, the sun don't even shine through a window pane.

But living un-rooted in the present may not be all it's cracked up to be. After all, the Sixties generation now looks like me, balding and pudgy, worried about our portfolios and our beach houses, railing as our parents did, against the nihilism of youth. And those pierced nihilists with their I-Pods and their My Space pages look back at us with a mixture of disdain and fear: "Will I really look like *that* someday? Will I forget my dreams, will I lose the words to my story like they did?"

Standing on the banks of the Jordan River, General Joshua looks at the people he is charged with defending, and he's worried about what he sees: the children of the people who knew what it meant to be slaves and yearn for freedom had only known a generation of the kind of aimlessness that freedom can become. They'd wandered in circles around the Sinai Peninsula, looking to the east, to the land they knew was theirs, but unable to enter in. They were a generation who had lost its story. They forgot what it was like to make bricks from the mud of the Nile. They forgot what it was like to feel a whip across your back. They forgot what it was like to have people curse you for existing, for breathing their air, eating their food, sharing their space. He could tell them the story, but he knew the sun wasn't shining through the window pane. They needed an Iron Age version of YouTube, so they could play the story over and over. So they wouldn't forget.

They are standing on the west bank of the Jordan, and Joshua and the priests plunge into the cold, muddy waters, still swollen with the rains of the new spring. Then, tribe by tribe, family by family, with their sheep and cattle, their belongings held high above their head, the people start across, timidly. And just like that, as if there were a dam suddenly erected upstream, the water slows to a trickle. The people slosh joyfully through the muddy river bed.

Finally, the last one is across, and standing in the Jordan's mud, Joshua orders the priests to roll twelve huge boulders up onto the bank, and set them in a circle, the ancient way of remembering, a monument to what happened first, before the Now got here. It's their

record of freedom, this circle of stones, the gravestones of the generations who came before, the birthstones of the generations that would come after.

“And when your children ask you someday,” says Joshua, “What do these stones mean?” then let them know, “This is the very spot that it happened, where the whole nation crossed over the Jordan on dry ground. This is where God dried up the Jordan for our generation just like God dried up the Red Sea for our parents’ generation. Tell the story of freedom, of redemption, of the God who gives bountifully to the least deserving. The story of the rolling stones, that rolled away the shame of slavery in Egypt.”

It’s the story that Jesus tells in today’s Gospel as well. You’ve heard it all your life as the story of the Prodigal Son. You heard it in Sunday school. You heard it in pop culture: Dorothy coming home from Oz, Han Solo receiving the mantle from Princess Leia, Frodo sailing off at last to Valinor, the undying land of peace. The only problem is, you heard it wrong. This is not the story of the Prodigal Son at all.

It’s the Pharisees, who, as usual, are Jesus’ straight men to set up the story. They are the religious people muttering into their beards about Jesus, who hangs out with the drunks and whores and tax collectors. Jesus tells them a story about a man with two sons.

The younger son is like so many young people, arriving in today with a thought neither of yesterday nor tomorrow. He knows that someday he will have his inheritance, but he can’t wait. Defying the rules of honor, he goes to his father and asks for his inheritance. He tells the old man, “Look, I know what you want me to be, but I’m not like my brother. I need my freedom. I want to see the world, I want more than this lousy little town, and life on this boring farm.” He might just as well have told the old man he wished he were dead, because under the law, that’s the only way he could claim his inheritance.

The old man nods, for he understands the young man’s desire for something more than this simple, farmer’s life. He orders it done, and the son sets off to see the world. But the world is crueler than he thought it would be, and he makes one bad decision after another, and soon—sooner than he would have thought possible—all his money is gone.

But he’s young, and strong and capable. He can work. Anything would be better than living on the old, dull farm. First come the jobs, one dead-end after another. And then comes the famine, and there’s no work, no food, no money. He’s desperate when he finally lands a job, on of all places, a farm. Well, at least he knows the routine. But this isn’t just any farm, it’s a pig farm, and nobody much pays attention to the dirty young man whose job it is to slop the hogs. He’s tired. He’s hungry. He’s a Jewish kid in a Gentile hellhole, stuck in a mud-filled pen with the one farm animal that makes his skin crawl. At least the pigs have plenty to eat, which is more than he can say for himself. The days pass and finally he can stand it no more.

“One more day in this place and I’m going to die. I’ve got to go back. Even the servants back on Dad’s farm have good jobs and enough to eat. I reek like a pig, I’m hungry all the time, I can’t sleep anymore. I’m tired.”

He slips away into the night, and begins the long, sad trip back home. All the way back, he's rehearsing what he's going to say. "Dad, I'm not even good enough to be called your son. Just give me a job. I'll live with the servants. I won't bother you. I'll just do what I'm told and shut up."

The sun is hot on his neck, when he makes out the first house in his village. He's got his lines down, if he can only get them out before the old man sends him away. As he walks slowly toward the village, he can see someone running towards him. An old man, his robes flying in the afternoon breeze, his black kaffia flopping loose around his head. The young man stops, staring in disbelief. It's his father, and the old man's running towards him, arms stretched out wide in welcome.

They fall together and the son doesn't even get his apologies out. The father wraps in him a new robe and places a ring on his finger, and calls for a feast to celebrate his son's return. The farm is alive with music and dancing, and the smell of barbecue wafting on the breeze.

That's when the older brother shows up. He's been working hard all day, out in the fields, taking care of the family business. He's a tough man, firm and fair, dedicated to the family business. He's not much for parties. They take away from his work. "What is going on here?" he demands of one of the servants, who's gulping down some of the old man's wine.

"Can't you see? It's a party, sir. Your brother has come home and your father has declared today a feast day! Come on in and celebrate!"

He will, of course, do nothing of the sort. Imagine. That good-for-nothing drunk has the audacity to come back, in the middle of the work day, and his father, the old, stupid geezer, has thrown him a party. He goes off to the stable and slumps in the hay, the hate and resentment covering him like black cloud. He feels the old man's hand on his shoulder, and shakes it off.

"Son, won't you come in and celebrate with us?"

He refuses to even look at his father. "Are you crazy? This—this son of yours took all your money, and wasted it on hookers and whiskey while I worked like a dog here everyday. I never asked you for anything, not even a little party for me and my friends. And now, you're wasting my inheritance on him!"

The old man smiles. "My child, your brother was dead, but he's back now, alive, and I'm happy. Everything I have is yours, and now I have your brother back too."

Jesus looks at the Pharisees, their faces twisted with hate, unable to join the party. Because they forgot the story. The story of the Prodigal Father, who spends lavishly on the son who doesn't deserve it, and throws a party when he comes home in disgrace. They were once the most unlikely of people, just a tribe of slaves in a foreign land. Now,

they are tough men, firm and fair, dedicated to the tradition of purity and true religion. And these people that Jesus hangs around with, these people who are immoral, profligate and thankless, these people deserve only their scorn.

Jesus leaves the story hanging there, as he often does, for us to choose its ending. Are we, as Paul says, going to continue to see Jesus' work from the human point of view, where the good guys win, where the religious, faithful, orthodox people are welcomed, and where the sinful, pagan, pig-feeders are shut out? Or are we going to see that, in Christ God was spending our inheritance by reconciling the world to back to God—the great Prodigal, making the sinless one sin so that we might become the righteousness of God?

When Paul says that we are God's ambassadors, he's calling us to story telling, to remembrance. For we did not just arrive here in the un-rooted present. He wants us to remember the twelve stones, the Red Sea, the wandering, the Jordan, the beginning. He wants this generation to be connected to that generation, and in that connection to find our connection back to God. During Lent, we've made a special effort to remember by retelling the great Ten Commandments and confessing about how we've broken them. In a few minutes, we are going to re-enact the last meal that Jesus shared with his friends before he died, so we can share that meal with all the hurting, hungry, lost and lonely people who don't deserve it.

It might seem a great waste, this freeing of the slaves, this stopping of rivers, all this partying for the undeserving, who don't even say "I'm sorry." But our God is a Prodigal, who spends it all so we can share in the divine story. So we can remember the rolling stones and the sun can shine once again through the window pane.