

## Old Israel, New Israel, and James

*Acts 10:23b-40a; 15:1-21*

This morning our study of the life of James, the younger brother of Jesus, has come about full circle. The story I've just read to you took place some decades after the resurrection of Jesus and, by this time, Jesus' younger brother James is not just a believer himself, but the spiritual leader of all the Christian disciples in Jerusalem. So he's come a long way from the woodshop where Joseph and Mary had brought up Jesus, James and their brothers as young apprentice carpenters.

You'll remember that Jesus was first one out. Because Jesus was never, strictly speaking, a carpenter's son, though Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus respected and honored his step-father nonetheless. But Jesus had a greater calling from his heavenly Father that required him to leave Joseph's house and his own brothers and become that Savior that God had been promising Israel since God first called Abraham to leave his home and his family in Babylon almost two thousand years before Christ.

So two threads have always been interwoven in the heart of any soul who wants to love and belong to God. The first is family, that we should honor our parents and love our spouses and nurture and discipline our children. And the second is that we should love and obey God in a way that comes even before love for family. The first thread, family, is necessary because, beginning with Adam and Eve, God promised that he would save the world through the offspring born of believing parents who are faithful to each other and who sacrifice for their children because they've learned in God's word that this kind of single hearted, sacrificial love marks the path that leads to heaven.

So Abraham left his father's family in Babylon to start a family of his own in Canaan, all based on God's promise that God would save the world through that family, the children who would arise from Abraham and Sarah. That salvation would arise from that family was so important that God commanded Abraham and all his descendants that every male child born or adopted into that family go through circumcision, a bloody ritual where a piece of skin was cut from a boy's reproductive anatomy.

The ritual was bloody to teach that no one will be loved or be forgiven by God unless Someone from Abraham's family sheds blood to pay for sin. So the Savior would come from Abraham through Isaac and then Israel. And the ritual involved a cut to teach repentance, that to belong to and love God is to let God cut from our lives those sins and wants and passions that stand between us and the way of life God calls us to lead. And finally, circumcision involves the

reproductive organ to teach that God will save the world through a human child born in an ordinary family.

So a gospel full of miracles and resurrection and salvation would all arise from a family woodshop in old Israel. And it follows that old Israel was all about family. It was shocking to old Israel that Jesus might leave his mother in tears and his brothers running the woodshop to wander the countryside teaching strangers a gospel and a kingdom that was supposedly from God.

It was shocking again to old Israel to hear Jesus tell of a Prodigal Son who would spend a third of his father's estate partying with strangers and then return home to be loved by his father as if he'd never left. In Jesus' parable, the father runs through the village to meet his son on the road because a village in old Israel would have pelted the boy with garbage if his father weren't there beside him.

Now there was mercy in old Israel. The Prodigal Son's desperate wish to be allowed home as a slave that might have been granted in old Israel. And then the boy could serve the rest of his days under that bitter, sullen, older brother in Jesus' parable whose heart was all wrong, but who still fit in by the standards of old Israel. He had stayed home while his prodigal brother had lost his way.

So in Luke 15, the father has to leave the house twice, once for each son, the younger son he found lost on the road and the older he found bitter and sullen in the field. In Luke 15, the Prodigal finds forgiveness and is restored to family, but Jesus leaves the older brother hanging fire. Will the older brother forgive, will he find forgiveness? Who knows? Jesus doesn't tell us.

Because the point of the parable in Jesus' mind was that, with the gospel, forgiveness was on offer, but old Israel was still hanging fire, still holding out for what they imagined they'd earned. Just as Jesus' own brothers had hung back for years, unbelieving in Galilee, while Jesus offered forgiveness to strangers out on the road, in the fields. But in Acts 1 last week, we read that James did better than the older brother in Jesus' parable. James had come around.

Because in 1 Corinthians 15, we read that one of Jesus' first stops out the grave was to find his own sullen, unbelieving, younger brother James. And so we guessed that the shock of that terrible, wonderful weekend where on Friday James lost his brother on the cross and then on Sunday James found him again, alive from the grave and back on the move, all that together was enough to open James' heart to a whole new set of possibilities he could never have learned from Old Israel.

And, again, the point here is not that the values and ethics of Moses' Law were in any way abandoned in the gospel Jesus taught. The commandments still held, marriage and family still mattered. The Prodigal was wrong to waste his father's estate. But the point here is that in the Savior and in his gospel is a forgiveness that more than makes up for the heartbreak and trouble our sins can cause. Open our hearts to returning to God, and the Father will meet us on the road, escort us past the shame, redeem us from the guilt and welcome us back into the family we've failed.

And a second point is that to imagine we don't need that kind of forgiveness will tempt us to a close-heartedness just as deadly as the excesses of the Prodigal. If we imagine we've earned the blessings God gives us, we won't love and appreciate him. We won't forgive who he forgives, we won't love who he loves. We'll construct a world of heroes and villains and the heroes all look like us, and the villains are inferior by nature. We'll become like the Pharisee in another of Jesus' stories, thanking God that we're not a tax collector, or gay, or worldly, or dishonest, or dysfunctional.

And we'll miss the whole point the gospel was meant to teach, that all God's children need forgiveness, we all must repent for something. Our passage this morning involves three characters, Peter, Paul and James, each of whom had found themselves on the wrong side of Christ and gospel, Peter, when he denied Christ after the Last Supper, Paul, who had persecuted Christians as a rabbi in old Israel, and James, who had not believed that his older half-brother really was the Savior God sent to an ordinary family in a woodshop.

All three had been caught in the wrong about Christ and now all three were caught in a riptide between old Israel and the new family Jesus had left home to gather on the roads and in the fields. Our Scripture Lesson, Acts 15, is about a hot controversy and if you read carefully you'll note that everyone involved is described as brothers and sisters, believers and disciples. So this isn't a story about heroes and villains. Everyone involved wants to do right and please God as best he understands it. What occasioned the struggle is that, beginning with Peter, years before in Acts 10, people outside old Israel, people not born into Abraham's line, not adopted into Israel's family, not kosher, not circumcised, new people, foreign people had begun to believe in Jesus in growing numbers.

And God had visibly welcomed each new people group into his new family by staging a sort of Pentecost in each new case. So Cornelius the Roman and all his uncircumcised Italian family and friends were visibly overcome by the Holy Spirit the moment they heard the gospel from Peter's mouth. You might have caught in our Call to Worship how uncomfortable Peter was to wander into a Roman house in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine in those days. If he hadn't seen a vision, if circumstances hadn't made it clear that God wanted him there, Peter

wouldn't have passed the city limits, never mind wander into a Roman house filled with Romans. But the moment they heard God's word from the mouth of Peter, every soul in that house was visibly overcome by the Spirit, uncircumcised though they were.

So Peter began to see what God's people would only gradually begin to grasp in the years that followed. That belonging to God, finding forgiveness, possessing his Spirit, being his children was no longer directly related to whether a person was descended from Abraham, or adopted into Abraham's family. Once Jesus had been "*born of a woman, born under the law*", Paul wrote, God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled. Jesus was the son God promised Abraham through whom "*All the families on earth shall be blessed.*"

And this was at least part of what Jesus was trying to say to Mary and his brothers in Mark's gospel, when he waved his arm at a bunch of strangers and said, "*Here are my mother and brothers!*" The point was not that Mary and James and Jude and Joseph and Simon were nothing to Jesus anymore. That would torn the first, most natural thread that holds our souls in a place where we can know and love God, love and loyalty to parents and spouses and siblings and children. Jesus still loved mother and brother all dearly and he would prove it on the Cross and after the Resurrection.

The point was that, with the birth of God's own Son in human flesh, any one of us who believes in Jesus belongs to God and we belong to each other entirely apart from who our ancestors were and who our descendants will be. It isn't about belonging to Abraham's family any more. The last genealogies kept in the Bible, one by Matthew and one by Luke, both pointed to the name Jesus, because now that Christ has come the whole human race can share what God gave Abraham as a gift entirely apart from the rituals and symbols God imposed on old Israel.

So Peter stood up that day for Cornelius the Roman and other foreigners like you and me and reminded all the kosher disciples in the Jerusalem church that: "*...we [Jews] believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as will the Gentiles!*" In other words, in God's sight, we're all prodigals, we all need grace. "*Why*" Peter asked, "*do you test God by placing a yoke, a burden on their necks that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear!*" Peter accused the kosher disciples of testing God because God had already voted, already given the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his uncircumcised, un-kosher family and friends, no questions asked.

So if God has left the house and gone out on the road and given his Spirit to people who don't look like family, it makes no sense for the kosher disciples to hang out in the field, sulking because they wanted the fatted calf and the Father's love all for themselves. God's generosity to prodigals will require the kosher disciples to make room in their hearts and room in the church

for other disciples the Father loves, even though they are far from kosher. And ironically it fell to James, Jesus' younger brother, to close the case that, now that Jesus has come, people can belong to God's family without having to pass through old Israel on their way home.

I say ironically because of all the apostles, James, the younger brother from the kosher woodshop, was most attuned to the values and customs of old Israel. There's no evidence that James ever set foot in a Roman home. Unlike Peter and Paul and Barnabas, there's no indication that James ever left old Israel to teach or lead Christian disciples from other places or backgrounds. James' heart was with his own people, the Israelite disciples of Jesus, who so struggled to accept the new prodigals that were crowding into God's family from such strange backgrounds and places.

But James knew that the days of old Israel were coming to an end. As a closing word, he quotes a prophecy from Amos, who had warned old Israel that "...*the tent of David...has fallen*" and that in the last days, "*after these things*" Amos sang, God would "*rebuild its ruins...and restore it.*" So David's house, the tent David set was going down, and God would lift it back up again, not just for Israel, not just for the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but Amos foresaw a day when God's house would be filled and I quote "*the remnant of humanity and all the Gentiles who are called by my name.*" Get ready Israel! The Prodigals were coming home.