

Salvation Realized
A Sermon by Chris Hensley
Based on Joshua 5:9-12 & Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Presented to Sardis Baptist Church
March 30, 2025

I have got some friends who run a printing and embroidering company who printed some merchandise for a local sports team. When I say local in this context, I mean to them. The sports team was not doing well financially and there were signs on the wall of a looming bankruptcy. My friends saw the signs and worked out a payment plan for an order which they fulfilled for the team. Sure enough, the owner of the team filed bankruptcy and was forced to sell and my friends were left with a, mostly unpaid, bill. This has been a couple of years ago and they are still waiting on the legal settlement and they have been informed that what they will be rewarded is a fraction of what they were owed even after some of the payments went through. That to say, when we finally see promises fulfilled, it is a relief, though in this world those promises are sometimes lackluster and unsatisfactory given the circumstances. My friends are naturally disappointed, though simultaneously grateful for what they are getting out of the settlement.

Our passages for this morning provide stories of individuals and groups who also are facing some tough realities within their stories and long standing promises surrounded in uncertainties. I do not want to dwell too long on our Gospel reading for this morning. This is one of the most familiar texts within

the Gospels collectively. It is a uniquely Lukan passage – all of chapter fifteen is unique to Luke’s account. This “Lost Chapter” offers parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Or, the stories of the persistent shepherd, the persistent woman, and the forgiving father. There are two things which I invite you all to take a look at when we consider the Parable of the Prodigal Son. First, Rembrandt’s painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, a beautiful piece of art. Take note of the father’s hands as you peruse the piece. The second thing which I invite you to take a look at is Amy-Jill Levine’s retelling of Jesus’ parables in her children’s book *Who Counts? 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*. This parable is a beautiful teaching on forgiveness and fulfilled promises of unending love in the face of disappointment and challenge in this life.

I wanted to zero in on our Hebrew Bible text for this morning in the book of Joshua. To set the context – because context, context, context – the Hebrew people have concluded their generation of wandering in the wilderness, Moses has died, and Joshua is leading the people now into the Promised Land. As we have touched on in recent weeks, the Land essentially takes on the identity of another character within the Hebrew Bible akin to Abraham, Elisha, Jehu, or Leah. The Promised Land takes on this role of serving as an anchor for the people of Israel. Beginning with Abram and concluding with Moses’ death and the transfer of leadership to Joshua, the Promised Land is

just that, a promise which will be fulfilled in some distant future time and, according to the text, takes generations to come to fruition.

Walter Brueggemann argues that “Land is a central, if not *the central*, theme of biblical faith.” His argument continues and suggests that landedness brings about a sense of historical belonging. The idea here, within the Hebrew Bible, is that being a people with land brings about a sense of belonging and stability which is lacking when living as aliens and slaves in a foreign land or as nomads in the wilderness. Further, there is a sense of faithful trust on the part of the people of Israel as they continue to await the fulfillment of this promise made to their ancestors .

In our Hebrew Bible text, Joshua has led the people of Israel across the Jordan, another crossing of a body of water which was parted. A literary sign of the guidance of a Divine figure in that a miracle occurred to remove an otherwise insurmountable obstacle. Finally, the people then partake of the fruit of the Land, eating and drinking the fruit of the promises made to Abram so long ago. As the people eat of the land, the manna which had been given to them, according to the text, each morning save the Sabbath, no longer falls from heaven. The people begin to live on the land even prior to their fully claiming it as their own.

This alone is worthy of celebration, a promise fulfilled. Unfortunately, I do not think that my friends will be celebrating when the settlement with the now defunct sports team is completed. However, for the people in both of our readings this morning, there is much to celebrate. Whether it is in the form of a child reunited with an unexpectedly forgiving and patient parent, or the fulfillment of a promise generations in the making. We see in our Gospel text that the forgiving father is quick to call for a celebration. We see in our Hebrew Bible text that the people of Israel were celebrating the first Passover in the Promised Land, remembering an event which began this final leg of the collective journey to where they found themselves in that moment.

Celebration is another one of those spiritual disciplines I was referring at the start of our time this morning. The people of God celebrated and often. In both passages, the people of God are celebrating and celebration is a natural reaction to salvation. We have been talking about saving salvation from a focus on that which has not come to an activity which we can busy ourselves with in the here and now. And, when we see salvation realized in this life – however it manifests – we are given an opportunity to celebrate another relationship returning to its intended function and reality. Let us be encouraged as we continue to work for salvation in the here and now, for ourselves, for others, and for creation itself, to celebrate all of the instances of salvation being realized all around us.