**3-31-19 (4h Lent)**

 **Gilgal: Removed by God’s Love**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

Joshua 5: 9-12 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21 Luke 15: 1-3, 11(b)- 32

RR: Psalm 32

**Summary:** Summary: God removes our sin and disgrace. We are not measured by human standards; in fact, it is Christ who is measured for us by divine standards and limitless love.

 It was at Gilgal, a place named after the Hebrew word for “removed,” that a new generation of God’s people was circumcised. No baby boy was set aside with this mark of the covenant during the entire 40 years of wandering. After the last of those who had disobeyed God in the wilderness had died, their children were set aside for God. The boys and young men had their foreskins removed, an act which mirrored God’s removal of the disgrace of being descendants of slaves in Egypt.

 Then, after a time for healing from the procedure, they celebrated Passover to further reinforce their common history and God’s act to call them out. On the same day, the manna stopped falling from Heaven and the people ate food grown in the Promised Land. They were home.

 The sins of the fathers ***did not*** follow the children; that is the point of all this! Guilt and disgrace, so intimately a part of the men, had been cut off along with the foreskin. As for us womenfolk, every future generation would be planted in wombs touched by this covenant.

 Psalm 32 sings of confession, of giving guilt and sin to God, of trusting that divine guidance and the ways of covenant life would guide our riotous souls like the bit and bridle used to tame horses. Horses are quite timid and mindful to run with their herd in time of danger, but – with an equestrian to guide them, a horse will run straight into battle although all manner of havoc be thrown at them, and they will be a formidable weapon.

 Paul reminds us that God, hearing our confession of sin, does not judge us by a human standard. No, God judges Jesus, who stands in our place, having died for that guilt and that sin.

 I recently saw a cartoon of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, bringing a sheep to the fold whose wool radiates the colors of the Transgender flag. One of the lead sheep is waving them off saying, “Woah, now; just woah! That one wasn’t lost, we threw him out!”

 Jesus just smiles, holding the sheep across his shoulder and replies, “I know, I found her.” Yep, that’s how Jesus really works!

 Also, I saw a skit where people were gathered before a panel of angels at the last Judgment. Each person came with a dossier filled with their life deeds, before an assessing angel, seated near a huge dial scale. A defending angel would point out the white pages in the dossier, and an accusing angel would point to the red pages.

 A man came forward with a dossier mostly filled with white commendations. “He is a writer and has written many inspiring novels of courage and hope,” said the advocate. “Only a few short stories were sent to Hustler,” remarked the accuser, “but they included photos of him and his mistress.”

 He stepped on the scale. It started up fine, but soon fell back into the “lost” category. A woman came up, “I went to church every Christmas and Easter and sent in a tithe every month.” “But the only time she stayed still in church and didn’t gossip was at her funeral,” remarked the accuser. Again, the red pages influenced a negative reading. To be fair, most of the scale was a danger zone, only a small white square at the far right read, “Fit to live with God.”

 So, it went until a man came up with a dossier almost completely full of red pages. The defender sighed and the accuser laughed, but – just then – Jesus steps out from backstage and says, “No, wait, I’ve got this one.”

 “Oh, said the angel by the scale, “we didn’t know this was one of yours.” The man went to step on the scale, but the angel held out his hand to stop him. “No, not you,’ he said: “Him.”

 Jesus steps on the scale in the man’s place, and the scale slid neatly all the way over to the “Fit’ zone.

 And that is the Gospel story of the Prodigal child. The son knows he has sinned against his father and God. Unworthy, unfit, all he hopes for is to be a servant now that he has spent his inheritance on disgrace and shame. Mud on his face, a big disgrace, slander on his name all over the place! He knows that he deserves rocks but hopes for a servant’s clean straw and a crust of bread.

 **[at this point my left hand, obviously not knowing what my right is doing, knocks over my previously read notes and they flutter to the floor, luckily leaving the notes I am working from in my right hand] –ad lib:** But, now, our sins have fallen away!

 Standing in for God, the Prodigal’s father will have none of his child’s admission of guilt and shame! Even the boy’s own brother wants nothing to do with him, but the father says that he is still family. “He was lost, but now is found, he was dead, but now he is alive!”

 And so, we come to Lent. After Gilgal, the manna fell no more, and people ate what they had grown. We also have eaten the results of the lives we have planted in manure, which is how we know that we still need the manna that comes from Heaven. Only, now, we know the true manna is Jesus, by whose perfect standard we are judged, instead of by the straw and the muck we have shared with the pigs.

 It is the hope of Lent that, as we have borne the image of the earthly, so we may bear the image of the One who stands in our place before God. We are judged by divine standards, applied to Him, and through Jesus we have hope to live with God as He does. We also have hope to live now, not as servants or friends, but as God’s family. For, once we were lost, but now are found. Once we were dead, but now we are alive forevermore. Let’s go out, gather in others mired in the pigsties, and live like children who have found their inheritance in love! Amen!