

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

March 27, 2022

4 Lent, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Joshua 5:9-12](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)

[Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

[Psalm 32](#)

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Have you ever seen a video of a dung beetle at work?

They may not be the kind of animal you'd want as a pet, but they're amazing creatures and they certainly serve an important purpose. A dung beetle can roll up a ball of its favorite, smelly substance ten times its own body weight. Then it climbs partway onto the ball, turns itself around, and uses its front legs to push backwards, rolling the ball in a straight line towards its burrow, sort of like a clown riding a ball.

Today we read one of the most famous and beloved gospel stories of all, what's often called the story of the Prodigal Son, although it could maybe more aptly be called the story of the Overwhelmingly Forgiving Father. And we'll get to that story. But this week I've kept coming back to our first lesson, from the book of Joshua. It takes place right after the people of God have ended their forty years of wandering in the desert after being liberated from slavery in Egypt.

God has finally brought them across the Jordan River into the promised land, into a land of their own. And God says this odd, intriguing line: “Today I have *rolled away* from you the disgrace, or the shame, of Egypt.” Such a strange and powerful image. Shame as a kind of tangible, physical substance that can be rolled away. And God, if you will, as a kind of heavenly dung beetle, gathering up and rolling away a big ball of shame.

Think about the shame the Israelites might have been carrying in this moment. Shame; not guilt; because there’s a big difference between the two. Guilt is the feeling we experience when we’ve done something wrong. Shame is what we experience when we believe there is something wrong with us. They had been enslaved. They had done nothing wrong to deserve that. They didn’t carry guilt for it; their enslavers did. But they bore the scars, physical and emotional. They carried the experience of having been deprived of freedom, of autonomy, of human dignity. They carried the experience of having been humiliated. Sometimes when people survive that kind of abuse and trauma it can produce a sense of lasting shame: a sense of being less than, a sense that maybe I really am what my abuser treats me as. And perhaps some of what God is saying to the holy people today is: you are worthy. You are mine. You are fully human. You are a slave no longer, and in fact even when someone was enslaving you you were not a slave but a child of the living God. Today I am rolling away your shame and giving you a home.

When I hear that phrase “rolling away the shame” I also can’t help thinking of another rolling away from scripture. In a few weeks at Easter we’ll hear of God rolling away a stone sealing the tomb of Jesus, rolling away the shame of death—the shame of death by crucifixion, death as a criminal and an enemy of the state, death as a public spectacle. The letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus, “for the sake

of the joy set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” Jesus willingly took on that shame for us—shame he had done nothing to deserve—again, shame, not guilt. As our passage from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians puts it today, Jesus knew no sin, yet he became sin for us; he was treated as sin for us; so that we might be clothed in his own righteousness.

“If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation!” Paul writes. Just like the people of Israel who are set free and given a new identity as the people of God, when we are joined with Jesus we are set free and given a new identity as a part of the people of God. And God rolls away our shame too. Whatever it might be. That new creation is new indeed and yet it’s also simply the restoration of who God created us as in the first place: beautiful, beloved, bearing the stamp of the one who loved us into being. God doesn’t make any trash. And even though God’s image in us can get obscured, can get covered up by layers and layers of ... stuff ... God is able at any time to roll it all away, to wash us clean in the waters of baptism and set us free.

Which brings us back to that prodigal son, far from home, wallowing with the pigs in the mud and in his own self-pity. Recently I heard about a six-year-old who picked up a children’s Bible and started reading through it for the first time. After a while, he turned to his mother with a shocked expression and said, “Mom, this book is absolutely full of people making bad choices!”¹ The younger son in this story has certainly made some. By asking for his inheritance early he’s essentially slapped his father in the face by telling him he wishes he was already dead. After burning his bridges, he wastes it all on big living. So this younger son is carrying

¹ Wendy Claire Barrie, *Faith at Home: A Handbook for Cautiously Christian Parents* (Church Publishing, 2016), 21.

not only plenty of shame but also a good amount of guilt too, because he's actually done some things wrong. Unlike shame, guilt is often a healthy thing. It's a signal that we need to reexamine our actions. Guilt calls for some amends, some actual deeds: it calls for confession, and then for a change of life. And the son, to his credit, makes a change. He practices his confession, and then he gets up and uses his feet to actually retrace his steps and go home—which is a good image for what Lent is for. When we find ourselves wandering in a land far from home, the thing to do is to name it, and then turn back towards God. And look how ready God is to welcome him home. “While he was still far off,” the father doesn't wait for him to get close, but races out to meet him. All the son has to do is take the first step back and the father does the rest.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,” he says, which is a good start. Confession. Guilt; the things he's done wrong. But then he veers into shame: “I'm not worthy to be called your son.” And it's as if the father's heard enough, because he seems to stop him right there. Bring out the robe and the ring for my son. Clothe him in what is his, this child who can never be anything else than my child.

This is Lent: a season for turning around. A season to come to baptism, or to return to our baptism; to return to who God created us to be, and who we are in Christ. God can take all our shame and roll it away like a heavenly dung beetle, like the angel rolling away the stone; and wash us in the living water; and put upon us the robe of salvation, which is our identity in Christ, an identity that can never be taken away: the precious child of God.