

Sermon: *Gilgal* (The Rock and Roll Sermon)
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This is the Sunday where we hear the story of the Prodigal Son. If you are like me, you've heard plenty of sermons on that story. Paired with this famous story is a short Old Testament reading from the sixth book of the Bible, Joshua. Although it's short reading, it is deep in meaning. What I would like to focus on is the word "Gilgal"; specifically, as written in Joshua (5:9),

*The Lord said to Joshua,
"Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt."
And so that place is called **Gilgal** to this day.*

All 39 books of the Old Testament are written in Hebrew. It's a fascinating language; one that I studied a little bit in seminary but have taken a much deeper interest over the last few years. Words in Hebrew have meaning, spiritual significance, and, for lack of a better term, they have power. There is a reason why they named that place Gilgal. First, it's based on a Hebrew verb, galal, which means to roll (away). Thus, they named the place To Roll (Away). To remember the day God rolled away the disgrace of Egypt, the Israelites rolled twelve stones and formed a circle. The stones represent each tribe of Jacob (he had twelve sons) and the circle represents unity and strength.

Let me take you on a brief history lesson to show why Gilgal is important. A long time ago, a man named Abram (later to be named Abraham) and his wife Sarai (Sarah) retired comfortably in a town called Terah (named for Abram's father) which is most likely in modern-day southern Iraq. God spoke to Abram and said to follow him to the Promised Land. He will have as many descendants as the stars in the sky. Here's the surprising thing, Abram and Sarai followed God! They eventually made it to modern-day Israel. They had one son, Isaac, who had a son, Jacob who had twelve sons.

One of the youngest sons, Joseph, was not well-liked by his older brothers and they sold him into slavery. He ended up in Egypt. He interpreted a dream from the Pharaoh that there would be seven years of bumper crops and seven years of famine. At Joseph's direction, the Pharaoh saved grain during the seven years and then distributed the grain after that. Egypt became a mighty (and wealthy) nation. Joseph's brothers traveled south to Egypt to get grain. They reunited and were forgiven by Joseph. That's how the first book of the Bible, Genesis, ends.

The curtain opens on the second book, Exodus. Many many Pharaoh's later, they had forgotten all that Joseph's people – called the Hebrews (because of their language) – and they became enslaved. No longer farmers, they were slaves forced to make bricks out of mud and hay. God called Moses from the burning bush to set his people free. And they were set free. They stayed in the wilderness until all the people of that generation, Moses included, had passed away. While they were in the wilderness, they had nothing to eat. God sent them "manna", a frosty flaky substance that blanketed the ground in the morning that they would eat. Then, in the afternoon, God sent them quails to eat. They had their carbs in the morning and their protein at night. ... for forty years. Then Joshua, who took over from Moses, brought them back into the Promised Land (modern-day Israel).

When our Joshua reading starts, the Hebrew people have become farmers again. This is the first year they've been able to eat the produce of the land. They celebrated the Passover (when the Angel of Death passed over their houses so that Pharaoh would let them flee captivity). And they called the place Gilgal because God had "rolled-away" their disgrace from Egypt.

Here is the significance. Once they became farmers and produced from the land, the manna from heaven stopped. They became self-sufficient. They then offered the Passover and made celebratory offerings to God. This was the beginning of the Hebrew (Israelite) people – farmers to artists to poets to engineers to merchants; they opened schools, made houses of worship, libraries, museums, etc. The disgrace of being slaves, of being dependent upon the manna, and, let's be honest, the religious customs of the Egyptians, were rolled away and they became self-sufficient worshippers of our one true (monotheistic) God. They called it Gilgal because God rolled away their disgrace.

Although it's not in the Bible, *God helps those who help themselves*, is a proverb that defines this generation and all the generations that followed. *We can do it, God helps* – that's another proverb. We are dependent upon God for everything AND God gives us what we need to work and be self-sufficient. When we do that, we are also told to remember who we are and to reach out in love and respect to help those who are in need. To this day, the people of the Jewish faith are told to remember that they were once slaves in captivity and that now they are to care for the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner (because they once were foreigners too).

Rolling stones – Gilgal – takes time. It takes a lot of effort and energy to roll twelve stones into a circle. It takes teamwork and patience. The verb to which we remember God, galal, is the One who rolls away.

Where has God been Gilgal in your life? Where has God, slowly and methodically, rolled-away your fears, disgrace or negative self-thoughts and feelings? When were you dependent and then became self-sufficient? Are you, who are providing for yourself, remembering to give thanks and make offerings to God? Are you caring for the orphan, widow and foreigner?

Gilgal, a place of remembrance, is important for us this day because we get to take stock of where we are and to see if we are doing what we are called to do – to give thanks, to love God and to love our neighbor.

As you can imagine, I have more to add to this story. Although the New Testament was written in Greek, I still hear Gilgal echoing in its stories. In particular, Jesus received a message that his friend, Lazarus was sick. Jesus, for unknown reasons, took his time going to Bethany to see Lazarus. By the time he arrived, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, confronted him because their brother had died. In particular, Mary said: If you had been here my brother would not have died. Jesus wept. He went to the tomb and said, Gilgal the stone (roll it away).

You see, the customary tombs back then had an opening that was sealed closed by a large rock in the shape of a wheel. It was so wild animals would not get in. Jesus said to roll the stone away (Gilgal). Martha said: he's been dead four days, there will be a stench. Again, Jesus said: roll it away. They did. Jesus said: Lazarus, come out! And he did. Jesus then said to unwrap him and set him free (Gilgal).

Jesus rolled away death. It was a Gilgal moment.

Not much later, Jesus was crucified on a Friday. The sun had set so they placed his body in a tomb, rolled a stone against the entrance and set Roman guards there for protection. The Jewish people back then, as today, do no work from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Mary and a bunch of other Marys and other women, waited until first light on Sunday (Easter) morning. They set out with the right burial spices to anoint Jesus's body according to custom. Along the way to the tomb Mary asked: who will Gilgal the stone? When they arrived at the tomb, the stone had already been rolled away! Gilgal (rock and roll!!).

One of the earliest Christian images was that of a rolled away stone. It was to show the miracle of the resurrection and new life in Christ. God Gilgal-ed the sting of death, the fear of death, the shame of death. God removed it and gave us new hope and life in Christ.

Where is your Gilgal? When has God rolled away fear and shame with you and replaced it with new life?

I have a story about a parishioner, Jan Webb. She told this story to others and gave me permission to share it. Jan was the Altar Guild director at All Angels for about twenty years. She was tasked oriented and helped many people become very good altar guild members. One thing she'd say is that the grace of the sacraments is up to God; it's up to us to set the altar and get it ready. When Jan was young, she fell in love and was engaged to be married. Her fiancée passed away before the wedding. She was heartbroken and thought that was her one and only chance at love. But then, after a while God rolled away her grief and she met the love of her life, David. They had a wonderful and long marriage. He too passed away. She was heartbroken and full of grief. But, God rolled that away from her too and eventually she met the love of her life, Pat. I met Jan a month or so after Pat passed away. She had grief, for sure, but she also had wisdom. She knew that in time God would roll away her pain. The love that she found, in her last year of life on this planet, was for her extended family. She moved in with her niece and nephew and had a wonderful time with them. She passed in peace, with a smile on her face and her hands reaching up to the ceiling. She knew that God was going to roll away her old, worn-out body and receive her into his arms of rest and peace.

Gilgal.

Amen.