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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
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Lent 4 – Year C
Joshua 5.9-12
Psalm 32
2 Cor. 5.16-21
Luke 15. 1-3,11b-32

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

St. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation [in other words, if you are in Christ, you are a new creature]: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” I don’t know about you, but I’m not sure I want to see everything become new. I like some things the way they are. For me, new means change, and change is sometimes hard. New, according to the advertisements we see and hear, is supposed to mean better or improved, but I often think it means “different,” and I’m not wild about “different.” You see, like most of us, I’m a creature of habit. You’re fortunate you never saw me as a lay person, because I would have been sitting over here on the gospel side – four pews from the front. You could have seen me in my former parishes – four pews back on the gospel side. You could have seen me in the seminary chapel – four pews back on the gospel side. It’s not that I don’t like change; it just takes some time to adapt to change.

I suspect that many of you feel the same way about change. At least by the pews you sit in every Sunday, I suspect that many of you feel the same way about change. It’s been said, however, that any creature – animal, human, church, committee – must change or else perish. To stay the same is to stagnate and die. Change is inevitable, so it’s not a matter of whether we’ll face change. Instead, it’s a matter of how will we respond to change. Will we stand in the way of change? Will we let change

overpower us? Or will we embrace change and shape the improvement and transformation that change can bring?

One way to embrace change is to remember that God is the primary agent of change. God is calling us to be changed people – a people freed from the bondage of sin and death and transformed to be the people who God calls us to be. Our Old Testament lesson from Joshua has a lot to say about change, especially change effected by God, and human response to it.

The people of Israel had been freed from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, but had wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their unfaithfulness to God. You may remember they had built a golden calf as an idol to worship while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God. As a consequence, God ensured that that sinful generation would not see the Promised Land. So it's that generation's children who, in today's reading, have crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

But reaching the Promised Land also brings change. The LORD says to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." The disgrace of the bondage of slavery in Egypt may have ended, but new worries of how to conquer the land begin. And you may remember that God had provided the people of Israel manna from heaven to eat while they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Once they reach the Promised Land, the manna ceases. They observe the Passover of the LORD by eating the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. On the day they eat of the produce of the land, the people of Israel no longer receive manna from God. Instead, they eat the crops of the Promised Land.

Think of how the people of Israel must feel! They make it to the Promised Land, the disgrace of bondage in Egypt has been rolled away, but they no longer receive food from heaven. God is doing new things. God provides for them in new ways, by providing crops from the land. God is telling them that the land is sufficient, that Israel could be self-sufficient. But that means working in new ways – conquering the land, planting and harvesting the crops, cleaning and preparing the food.

God is calling us to work and act in new ways, too. Of course, Israel was not self-sufficient. No one is self-sufficient. We all depend on God, whether we admit it or not. God will provide for us, if we learn to embrace the change that God is effecting and help bring about the improvement and transformation that God wants.

Just as God was effecting change as God fulfilled the promises under the Old Covenant by bringing the people of Israel to the Promised Land, so does God effect changes for us, the people of the New Covenant, as God promises us the gift of transformed life. We are fed by the stories of Jesus' teachings, healings, and miracles as we wander in the wilderness of our lives, trying to find our way to the Promised Land by following God's lead and Jesus' example. But God, through Jesus Christ, has shown us a new way to be fed. On the night of the Passover of our Lord, when Jesus passed over from death to life, God rolled away the stone from the tomb so that we may be freed from the bondage of death. In the resurrection of Jesus we are raised with Christ to new life by virtue of our baptism. And we are offered a taste of that Promised Land, that promise of new and unending life in union with God through Christ, through the Holy Eucharist. In the Holy Eucharist, the Body of Christ is the food from heaven that

never ceases. As we prayed in the collect at the beginning of this service, Jesus is the true bread that came down from heaven which gives life to the world.

Through the Holy Eucharist, God makes us new people; God re-creates us. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” God is calling us to new ways of living, to new ways of loving, so that we can help shape the improvements and transformation that God wants for this world.

Today’s story from Luke’s Gospel is an example of how we can transform God’s creation around us as God transforms us and makes us new. Most people are familiar with this story as the parable of the prodigal or lost son, but I prefer to think of it as the parable of the forgiving parent. The parent is identified as God because he forgives his child from his waywardness and welcomes him back home. But look at how God is acting throughout this story to make all things new.

First, the parent is willing to look at his property in a new way, by dividing and distributing his legacy even before he’s dead. He’s willing to let his son go and be independent. Once the son has squandered his inheritance, is forced to hire himself out, and realizes that his father’s hired hands are better off, he “comes to himself,” as the Gospel says. God gives him a new heart as he decides to repent and return to his father and ask his father to treat him as a hired hand. God has already transformed the son, because the son is ready to begin a new relationship with his father, not as a son but as a hired hand. Of course, the father shows true forgiveness and the power of transformation when he welcomes his son back with such celebration that the son doesn’t even have time to ask to be allowed back in a new relationship as a hired hand.

And the older son, not quite as transformed or transforming as his father, nevertheless is assured that he is always with his father and that all that is his father's is also his regardless of how he may stray. By allowing God to work new things through him, the father was able to transform lives, relationships, and an entire family. God can effect such change in us if we let God, so that our lives, relationships, and families can be transformed too.

As for me, I know that we are called to be a new people. I'm trying to embrace change more, and see God's hand in effecting change and help shape the improvement and transformation that invariably comes with God's purpose. I do know that I'm no longer sitting four pews back on the gospel side, so I'm not resistant to all change.

So look around at God's creation. Look around at God's creatures. Look inside yourself and "come to yourself." "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Amen.