

Can We Start Again?

Fr. Thomas Ryden

March 30, 2025

Scriptures: Joshua 4:19–5:1, 5:9–12; Psalm 34; II Corinthians 5:17–21; Luke 15:11–32

I have to start out this morning by thanking Fr. Jack for his choice in the preaching schedule for having me preach today. Preachers will often let the congregation know when they sense they have been given a particularly difficult text or a difficult day to preach, but I come here this morning to do the opposite. For it is Refreshment Sunday, our Lenten midpoint. Today we come up for air and see that Easter is on the horizon. Twenty-two days of fasting or at least our best effort at fasting completed, eighteen to go. So the mood is good! It is even better for me today because today is the first Sunday of the 2025 Major League Baseball Season. Opening Day this past Thursday means that my Atlanta squad and the rest of the MLB teams are now in action, in games that count, racing for October. You will seldom find a more hopeful baseball fan than at the beginning of the season. In a new season, anything is possible. The losses and injuries haven't started to pile up yet, and it feels like everyone has a chance. I am hoping for a great summer of listening to a game on the radio while I grill in my driveway. Good days are ahead!

It sure feels good to start again doesn't it? Maybe the reasons we are starting over again aren't always causes for celebration, but the opportunity to begin anew, to do things right this time, to be more hopeful, more loving, more prepared, this is an exciting opportunity. I have found it to be a powerful force when I am in a tense conversation to say something like, "I feel that we aren't hearing one another, can

we start again?" If possible, such a move can reframe a destructive conversation into a constructive one.

Starting again can certainly be a good thing, but you may rightly be thinking that it isn't always possible. Some things can't be unbroken, it seems. When it comes to slacking on Lenten disciplines, how much slacking makes it pointless to keep them at all? What if those disciplines were a lofty thought on Ash Wednesday but we never got around to starting them. Is it too late to start again? Is it too late to start for the first time? Maybe that question runs even deeper than our practices of discipline during a liturgical season. Maybe we have walked away from practicing our faith more generally, maybe our faith feels stale and stagnant, maybe we are wondering if we have a faith at all.

Our spiritual lives can get run off the rails by the same sort of anxieties and worries that hinder us in other areas of life - our health, our professional life. What I am talking about is the type of guilt or fear of failure that perpetuates the very thing we are feeling guilty for. "Oh I missed my workout this week, so there is no point in going next time. I'll be worse off than I was last time." "I can't play that minor seventh chord, I can't get that shading just right, so why should I try?" It is so easy to see the lie in this type of guilt and shame and yet, it is so easy to give into it, especially in our spiritual lives. But physical fitness, mastery at a form of art, or spiritual disciplines, these are won or lost on the ability to keep showing up, the desire to renew and start again, even and especially after failure.

So on this Refreshment Sunday, I want us to see the God who invites us to begin again. Each of these Sundays in our Lenten season is a feast day, where we relax our fasts in anticipation and celebration of the Easter we know is coming. Let this pattern also present to us a new opportunity each Sunday to renew our commitment to our disciplines, to refresh our commitment to listening to the call of God in this Lenten season.

Easter itself is an opportunity for a new beginning, a renewal. It is at Easter that we as the Church renew our baptismal vows together, a yearly reminder of the commitments we have made to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil and to turn to Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

So when it comes to our faith, to the commitments we have made to the Lord and to one another as the Church, yes, we can start again, and refreshment Sunday is the perfect time to do so.

Our readings today point us to this theme of beginning again, so let's begin with our reading from Joshua.

Going back all the way to this early account of God's people, we see that God has always been the God who desires that his people renew their commitment to him. Let's set the scene here a little bit.

The Exodus has ended. The people have crossed over into the Promised Land having spent 40 years wandering in the desert. Joshua has been selected to take the mantle

of Moses as the people's leader. Spies have been sent into the Promised Land and the decision has been made to go in. Just before this passage was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, where the waters stopped for the people to cross, the Ark of the Covenant ahead of them, a fitting bookend to a forty year journey that began with the crossing and deliverance at the Red Sea.

And so we get to our reading today. The people begin with making a memorial out of twelve stones, a way to remember God's faithfulness through the generations generally and the crossing of the Jordan specifically. This is aside from the focus of today's sermon, but it is significant that remembering is an important part of the process of renewal.

And renewal is what comes next. You will see if you are following along in your pew Bible that we skipped over a few verses in chapter five this morning, and that is mostly because the practice of circumcision is mentioned eight or nine times in just a few verses. So to spare the readers, we went with a shorter reading today. But I mention it here now because it is significant. In the circumcision of the males, a practice that had lapsed in the wilderness, and in the holding of the Passover, this is a renewal of the covenant. As the people begin a new phase, they need to be drawn back to the covenant that was made with their ancestor Abraham.

The people had been through a trying time in the desert. They were about to experience more adversity in the Promised Land. They were going to be tempted to follow after the idols and gods of others living in the land. They needed to be

reminded of the covenant they held with the one true God. More than a reminder, they needed a renewed commitment to walk with him. They needed to start again.

We, like the people of Israel, are a marked people. Our baptism is the sign of the New Covenant, beloved sons and daughters of God washed in the waters that recall not only the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, but the water that flowed out of the side of our pierced Savior.¹ And just like the Israelites coming out of the desert after forty years of wandering, we too will emerge soon from our forty days of Lenten fasting. As they renewed the covenant of Abraham with circumcision and the Passover meal, we will renew our baptismal vows and feast for the season of Easter. It has always been God's desire for his people, when they are led astray, to return and to renew the commitment to him. He has been doing this kind of work all along.

But how are we renewed? What makes the waters of baptism so special? The one who was baptized in them, the one who died and rose for our sake! "If anyone is *in Christ*," Paul writes to the Corinthians, "he is a new creation." Starting again is possible, but only through the person and work of God the Son. Without Jesus, there is no starting over. We don't get to renew our pursuit of God simply by our own merits, but because of what God has done for us.

If the story of the Israelites renewing their covenant with God tells us the answer to what starting again with God looks like, and the person and work of Christ is the answer to how renewal is possible, what is left is to discuss the why. Why does God

¹ St. John Chrysostom connects the water that flowed out of Jesus' side to baptism in *Death and Resurrection*, 30ff.

care about renewal? He's God, Creator of heaven and Earth, he could just start over. We're so far gone, why not just wipe the slate clean and start from scratch?

Jesus answers this question by telling a story about an ungrateful son and a loving Father. You have heard it before, but as an invitation to start again, let's look at it one more time.

A hasty and shocking rejection of family ties. A selfish and entitled request for an early inheritance. When the Prodigal leaves home with half of Dad's money, he's telling him he values that cash more than the fact that his Father is living and breathing. What a colossal waste he makes of it all. Rock bottom. Having spent everything he hastily ran away with, the younger brother finds himself taking from food that was meant for the animals.

But then a memory. Not twelve stones stacked on top of one another to signify a river crossing, but a remembrance of a loving Father all the same. "Dad surely won't take me back as his son, but at least if I worked for him I could live. I've seen how he treats his employees well; it's worth a shot at least."

And maybe, just maybe there is a spark of hope as the son walks back home, but he tries to squelch that feeling down as often as it pops up so he is not disappointed. Sure, the Father is loving and gracious, but he couldn't be *that* loving and gracious. Yes, best to expect at the very most, an honest day's wages for an honest day's work. That's better than what he deserves.

And then there is that clause that is so full of meaning, “But while he was still a long way off...” This conveys the timing of what happens next, but it does a good bit more, doesn’t it? The son is not yet home. He had time to change his mind and turn around. But no, the Father is not going to let that happen. “But while he was still a long way off,” the Father runs. The time will come for apology and hard conversations, conversations about how things will be different this time around, but that time, in the Father’s mind, is not right now. He is grasping at any chance he has for his son to come home, so the first item on his agenda is to run out, as fast as he can, and to make sure the boy gets home for real.

If you want to see the heart of God, that’s it right there. We know it is a trustworthy account because Jesus gives it to us himself. When we wonder how starting again is possible, we should remember what God is like, the Father who joyfully welcomes the prodigal home.

So yes, we can start again. And we, who have started again, are now representatives of God’s invitation to start again in the world. Hear again what Paul says in second Corinthians after he says those in Christ are a new Creation: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ...”

Far be it from us to think that God's reconciling, refreshing, and restarting work ends with us. We are not the last Prodigals to receive God's grace. No, his will is that all his children may return to him.

There is a warning in the parable of the Prodigal that we may not always see. Often, and rightfully so, we picture ourselves in the story as the younger brother, the one who needed to come home, and we weep at the beauty of the Father's love. But there is another brother. The open-ended nature of the end of the story makes it impossible to say for sure his fate, but there certainly seems to be a chance that the story ends with one brother outside the overflowing joy of the Father. It is that older brother, inspired by those Pharisees and scribes whose comments about who Jesus chooses to eat with prompts the telling of this story in the first place. When we forget our own wanderings in the far country, when we start to take the love of the Father for granted, we can get cynical and bitter when that opportunity to begin again is offered to someone we don't feel deserves it. And so we choose the way of the second prodigal son, the self-imposed exile of a bitter heart.

So if you need a restart today, on Lenten commitments, on following Jesus, on desiring for God's will to be done and his Kingdom to come in your life and in the world, today is a great day to begin again. If your neighbor, your friend, your loved one, your enemy chooses to begin again today, the Father is in the front yard, ready to run to greet them. Make sure you don't skip out on the reunion party.

Renewal, refreshment, a new beginning, these are all available. God has been doing this sort of thing since his people were wandering around in deserts. That work was

completed for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus and his New Creation life is available to those who would take part in him. And all of this is sealed and guaranteed by the love of a Father who is looking intently to the horizon, running shoes tied tightly, eager to welcome us home.