

Wednesday in Lent 4 2020
By Faith Joseph
Hebrews 11:22

"By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. "

The first book of Moses ends with the burial of Joseph. It is obvious from these last verses that this is only a beginning, the Genesis (if you will), of yet another story.

Joseph lived a full life, serving 80 years as the advisor to Pharaoh of Egypt, and living to a ripe old age of 110. But, his life and faith look **forward**, not backward. As Pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt, Joseph could have been buried in elegant fashion, and with much to be remembered for, but instead he makes his sons swear an oath to carry his bones up from Egypt to the Promised Land, because "God will surely visit you." (Gen 50:25)

One of the details in the story in Genesis is that Joseph's body is embalmed. That means his body is preserved like the ancient mummies in the Egyptian tradition, which means **Joseph's body was preserved for a very long journey.**

After crossing through the Red sea, you may recall the children of Israel had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. The Bible tells us the children of Israel faithfully carried Joseph's bones for those 40 years until they reached the Promised Land. Joseph always knew his resting place was **not** in Egypt. He was a visionary for his own family and for all the children of Israel. And his vision was granted by the promise of God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Jos 24:32)

The story of Joseph teaches us that faith is ever looking **forward** to the future, and it always does so on the **basis of God's Word.** I've noticed a

trend lately. Funerals are commonly referred to “celebrations of life.” That is a reflection of the secular times in which we live. Secular funerals today look backwards to memories and the past, and not forward. There’s a reason for that -- people who die without faith have no life in heaven to look forward to after death. Yes, Christian funerals look backwards and forward. They treasure the memories but they sing of the hope that is yet to come. Faith looks **forward** to the future. It hears the promise of God and then makes its plans accordingly.

When Jacob died, he made his sons swear to him that he would be buried in the land of Canaan, not in the land of Egypt. In faith, Joseph knew a time was coming when God would visit his people and lead them up out of Egypt.

One of the consistent themes of our reading in Hebrews chapter 11 is that faith is always looks to the future, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (He 11:1)." This means faith is only casually glancing at the past but is **intensely** looking to the future.

Now, that's easy to say when you are young. When you are young you are always looking to the future. Right? You can't wait until you next birthday. You want to get older as soon as possible so you can do the things others get to do: drive the car, go to your first communion, shave your first whiskers, go on your first date and then head off to college. The future is wide open when you are young!

But then you settle down. All those difficult decisions, such as who to marry, where to live, and what to do with your life start to fade in the rear-view mirror of life.

But your life isn't over yet. Your future is still wide open! Like Joseph who made plans for his bones and where they would be laid to rest, so we,

too, can't stop thinking about our future, because God has made us a **promise**. That promise is the new heavens and the new earth that will be revealed on the last day. That promise is everlasting life.

So, how do you confess that hope in your life? Allow me ask you some questions. Do you have a Christian preamble to your will? Do you have Scripture verses and Christian hymns of substance chosen for your funeral? Do you know where your children will lay your bones to rest? Have you made provisions for your children's children so that your memory will live on in them? Even in your parting gifts, your faith can be seen. You want them to be encouraged in the Christian faith, because that is the most important thing in your life, and in theirs as well. You want them to remember you, to be sure! But you want them to remember **Jesus** who suffered and died for them for the forgiveness of their sins, and rose again, to give them the hope of everlasting life.

Joseph made his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, promise him that they would carry up his bones from Egypt. Joseph wanted his two sons and all the children of Israel to be encouraged in their grief. He wanted them to keep on looking to the future in faith. He wanted them to remember not just his life ... but the life that was yet to come, for God's promise would sustain them. And His promise would come to pass. So, too, we should leave final instructions for our children that will testify to the promises of God, so that they too will be encouraged in their Christian faith!

There is something else you should know about Joseph. He is the first of many generations that do not hear directly from the God of Israel. God spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which is why He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was to them the promise of land, descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky and a Savior who would

come from their own bodies was spoken. But Joseph and the generations that come after him, until the days of Moses, are those who go without any direct revelations from God. All they have is a **promise** spoken long, long ago.

God spoke directly to Abraham on several occasions. Isaac also personally received the promise of God. God would also appear to Jacob. The Lord would famously wrestle with Jacob in the night and change his name to Israel and then God would repeat the promise to him.

There are no stories like this in the life of Joseph. God never spoke to him directly like God spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But his father Jacob told him of the promise God had spoken to his father Isaac and to his grandfather Abraham. He told him of that night when the angel of the Lord wrestled with him and changed his name to Israel. Joseph, in turn, told these stories to his children and to his children's children to the second and third generations. And that was the only connection the whole nation of Israel would have to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I mention this to you because we are just like the generations that came after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We only have the promises of God in the written Bible. We tell those stories written there for us and tell everyone about Jesus because we too want our children, and our children's children to cling to the promise. For our death is not the end of our life, nor is it the end of the promise. We are always looking to the future when God will fulfil the word He has spoken to us.

The apostle Peter once warned the church that there will be those who give up on this promise. And they will invite you to do the same. He writes, "Scoffers will come in the last days ... They will say, "Where is the promise

of His coming? Forever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation (2 Pe 3:3)."

Which is why St. Peter continues with these words,

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.... But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (II Pt 3:3b-13)

God will keep his promise. So, let us keep the faith, faith not only for ourselves ... but faith for our children, and our children's children. Our bones will speak from the grave that there is hope even beyond this life. They will say that God has promised a new heavens and a new earth the home of righteousness!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Wednesday in Lent 4 2020
By Faith Abraham, Part Two
Hebrews 11:17-19

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

Tonight, we are going to take another look at Abraham’s faith, but this time with a focus on the later part of his life. Last Wednesday, we made the point of saying that Abraham never saw the things he was promised. He was promised three things: land, children as numerous as the stars of the skies, and a Savior who was to come from his children’s children. He never received any of these things. But at least Abraham did receive a portion of the promise; may we could consider it a down payment! Not land...he even had to purchase land to bury his wife. Not a Savior, He would be born many generations later. Not children as numerous as the sands of the seashore. But, he does have a start. He has a son, an only son, named Isaac whom he loved.

“Isaac” means “laughter” because both Abraham and Sarah had laughed at God’s promise. It is important that you remember the name Isaac...because God’s promise specifically names him. In Genesis chapter seventeen, we read, “God said...Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.” (Ge 17:19)

Isaac is a joy to his parents because he connects them to the promise. Then God tested Abraham’s faith, “Take your son, you only-begotten son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer

him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” (Ge 22:2)

Abraham does exactly as he is told. But he acts not only according to the commandment of God but also according to the promise, for God had said, “through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” (Ge 21:12)

These two things work in tension in Abraham’s life. He has a clear commandment from God, “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...and offer him...as a burnt offering.” But, He also has a clear promise, , “through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” (Gen 21:12)

Many people recognize that Abraham’s obedience to the Lord is commendable! He is celebrated as a true man of God because he does what God commands. But, Dear Friends, do not lose sight of the promise of God in this story. The writer to the Hebrews tells us to imitate is the faith of Abraham in the promise.

Isaac is specifically named as the one who comes from both Abraham and Sarah’s body who will fulfill what God has said. And this is on Abraham’s heart and mind as he enters the land of Moriah with his son. He believes that Isaac will survive this ordeal, because God has promised to fulfill his promise through Isaac by name. And it is this faith in the promise that propels Abraham onward and up the mountain to make a sacrifice to the Lord.

Note Abraham’s faith in the promise of God. Abraham says to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” “I and the boy!” Abraham is confident they both will return! The second statement of faith is in verse eight. The context is the haunting question of Isaac on their way up the mountain, “My father! Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burn

offering?” And his father answers in faith, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

Abraham acts in obedience and faith, but it is his faith that lifts his spirits. The commandment is hard and cruel. Take your son, your only son whom you love, and offer him up as a sacrifice to me. But God has promised and God cannot lie. Abraham goes up the mountain confident that God will keep his word.

The Old Testament looks forward to the cross. The entire story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac points to Jesus – it teaches us the love the Father has for us that He would sacrifice His Son in our place.

The land of Moriah is the place of Golgotha. The land of Moriah is the same as Jerusalem and Calvary where Jesus would suffer and die for our sins. The language is also the same: “...take you son, your only son whom you love.” And Jesus said to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16)

And then there is this word from John the Baptist. He sees Jesus coming toward him and he says to his disciples, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (Jn 1:29) Abraham was right -- God himself did provide the lamb. The male lamb that would be the substitute for Abraham’s only son... and that male ram is pointing us to Jesus who would take the place of all sinners to be slain.

And, we have the words of Jesus Himself. In His testy argument with the Jews, Jesus says an amazing thing: “Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” Abraham saw the day of the Messiah on the mountain in the land of Moriah. He saw the ram caught in the thicket. He saw the substitutionary sacrifice that took the

place of his son...his only-begotten son that he loved. He saw Jesus as the angel of the Lord who repeated to him the most important part of the promise, "...in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gen 22:18)

The story of Abraham is the story of his faith, and that faith is in Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Once again, Abraham had only two things on his mind...the dreadful commandment of God and the wonderful promise. The dreadful commandment was to offer up his only son. The wonderful promise was that through this son...and not just any son...but through this son Isaac, God would fulfill his promise that even if he should slay Isaac, God would raise him from the dead. This is what the writer to the Hebrews tells us, "he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (He 11:19).

Commandment and promise; Law and Gospel...they always live in tension in the life of a Christian. We cannot live according to the law of God. We cannot comply with the righteous requirements of God....not because we are unwilling but because we are unable. We are sinners by birth. We are sinners in our daily lives. And the knowledge of this moral failure terrorizes our lives. For the commandment of God also includes condemnation for those who do not obey it, "The wages of sin is death." (Rom 6:23)

Yet, we believe the promise. "The gift of God is eternal life!" Jesus is the lamb of God who still takes away our sins. We trust that God still receives us as his beloved children because of the forgiveness of our sins. And it is this gospel that motivates us to live according to the commandments of God.

Listen to this carefully: Abraham is counted righteous not because he obeyed the call of God. Abraham is counted righteous because he believed the promise of God. And it is the promise that sustained him in his difficult task. Abraham is commended for this faith and we are called to imitate his faith.