

Sermon – September 6, 2020
“Carry My Bones from Here”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 45:16-28; 50:22-26

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and be with us and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good Morning! Welcome to September, the month when summer ends and fall begins. I hope that you are enjoying the last of the warm days of summer and are ready for frost and cold weather. School is beginning and we need to keep the children, teachers, staff, and administrators in our prayers as they venture into the uncharted waters of education in the wake of Covid-19. We continue to be amazed each week by what we are finding in the Book of Romans at the Afton Bible study and also in the Old Testament Bible study at Fairfields. Please consider joining either of those groups as they study God’s word. I hope that you have been enriched by our journey this summer through Genesis. I also hope you will continue to read the Old Testament, allowing God’s word to work its transforming power in our lives. Let’s look this morning at the last of our ancestors’ story in Genesis.

Joseph has now revealed himself to his brothers and for the first time in years, they have talked with each other. Joseph has commanded them to go and get his father and bring him down to Egypt so that Joseph can provide for him and all of their family to sustain their lives. Pharaoh has heard that Joseph’s brothers have come and invites them to come and settle in the land, promising them the best of the land and the fat of the land. He invites strangers and foreigners to come and live in Egypt, not to be just sustained but to receive the very best that Egypt has to offer. Pharaoh invites them as honored guests, people that all of Egypt desire to have among them. He tells them not to worry with bringing their possessions; they will be well cared for in Egypt. He sends wagons to bring their families back to Egypt.

I have many questions about the moment when the brothers arrive in Canaan at the place where Jacob is waiting. He is ill and grieving the loss of Joseph, the possible loss of Benjamin,

and is living his days in an anxious state as he waits for the return of his sons. I wonder about the chatter among those in the camp around his tent as they see the brothers with so many donkeys coming across the field and then see the wagons coming behind them, wagons from Egypt, an uncommon sight in Canaan. I imagine the scene as the brothers go into their father's tent and share the words they have rehearsed each day during their trip as they tried to decide how to break the news to Jacob that Joseph is alive. The implications are that they are not trustworthy. They have lived up to the "bad report" that Joseph brought to their father many years ago before he disappeared. The brothers are responsible for Jacob's grief and anxiety; and now they have news to share. The scripture does not tell us which brother brings this good news, but that "they" tell Jacob, "Joseph is still alive!" I have this picture in my head of the brothers all gathered around Jacob and then they tell him, "Joseph is still alive." We are told that Jacob is shocked, stunned, and does not believe them. He has been in grief wondering how the promise from God could continue since Joseph is dead and the brothers are not worthy bearers of the promise. And now comes this news from the brothers, words Jacob never expected to hear. We should recall the disciples' response when they hear the news that Jesus is alive. They, like Jacob, are shocked and wondering how the kingdom that Jesus taught them about could now come to be since Jesus is dead, and they also cannot believe the good news that comes to them that Jesus is alive. The disciples will not believe until Jesus appears to them and they can see him. Jacob begins to believe Joseph is alive when he sees the wagons and his sons tell him the words of Joseph, that Joseph is ruler over Egypt. As these things come into his mind, Jacob replies, "It is enough. My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die." The word translated here as "enough" may not be the best translation. If we look just a little deeper at the range of meanings the Hebrew word can have, we will find it also means "sufficient" as in their information is adequate for Jacob to go and see for himself. Or it can mean "abundant" as in the news is beyond good; it is abundant good news that Joseph is alive. The heir is alive, and joy fills Jacob's heart, and he is transformed from one who is grieving to one who is revived and ready to go and see for himself this son that was lost and is now found. The disciples have this same reaction when they receive and believe the good news about Jesus' resurrection and their sorrow turns into abundant joy. We see this joy aspect in the story of Christ's birth as well. The shepherds who hear the good news are filled with joy about the birth of the Christ child.

Now we could stop our journey through our ancestors' story here and just let the joy of this moment be our ending point, but there are just a few more stops that I think we need to make. Jacob and the brothers pack up their belongings and take everything, all of their families, all of their possessions, all they have, and they journey to Egypt. Jacob has them stop on the way out of Canaan at Beer-Sheba to worship God. He wants to celebrate this great good news in the place where his father Isaac built an altar and worshiped God. Jacob worships God and then in the night God appears to Jacob in a vision, another dream given to our family. In the vision God calls Jacob's name twice and we hear Jacob answer, "Here I am" or in Hebrew, hennie, that now familiar word that marks an openness of one to respond to God's call. God tells Jacob in the vision that he is not to be afraid to go down to Egypt for in that place God will make Israel into a great nation. God also tells Jacob that He will go with him to Egypt and that He will bring them up again and Joseph's own hand shall close his eyes. God will go with them and bless them on this journey and what Jacob has longed for, that his son Joseph would be present at his death, will be given to him. God does not speak to Joseph directly, but here one last time he speaks to Jacob and assures him that God will be with Israel and will bring them back a great nation from this journey into Egypt. They go on their way to Egypt, seventy persons in all.

Let's make two more quick stops on our journey. The first is at Jacob's deathbed as the patriarch charges his sons with their final task, to bury him with his ancestors in the land of Canaan in the cave that Abraham bought as a burial site. Jacob wants to be buried in the land of Canaan, the land that God has promised to Israel. The nation of Israel does not yet hold this land, but Jacob's final request is to be buried there as a sign that God will bring Israel back to the Promised Land. His request speaks to a future time when Israel will also come back to the land, a time when God's promise will be fulfilled.

Our last stop for this journey in the Old Testament is at Joseph's death. Joseph lives to be 110 years old, the perfect age for an Egyptian. He is blessed to see the children of the third generation, his great grandchildren. This is a blessing that God gives to some of our ancestors and to some of us today, to see our great grandchildren. Those in the Old Testament times who were given this gift were seen as greatly blessed by God. As Joseph dies, he makes his brothers promise to him a future action concerning his bones. He tells them, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So, Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you,

you shall carry up my bones from here.” And so, the story of our ancestor Joseph ends with his death and a promise to a future time, a time when God will take note of the people of Israel and come to them and take them from Egypt to the land he promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, the Promised Land. Even in Joseph’s death, there is a promise to a future time when God will act and fulfill the covenant promise made to our ancestors. Joseph dies as he has lived his life, not looking back to the past, but looking forward to a future time when God will act to bring about the covenant promise to our ancestors, to make a nation of Israel, a great nation who will be a blessing to all the people of the earth.

Before we leave our summer journey with our ancestors, let’s take just a moment to look back at our journey this summer. We started our journey with God creating the heavens and the earth and with the very good creation of humankind who were in perfect or complete relationship with God, walking and talking with God. We have seen Eve’s eyes look to the fruit of the tree, send her hand, take some fruit, and she and Adam ate and sin entered into humankind; and the relationship with God was broken. With sin comes its consequence, death. Humankind’s situation is now desperate. They are fallen and separated from a holy God who loves them. And so, a journey back to God begins, not one that our ancestors chose, but one that God directs as He guides, helps, and steadfastly loves humanity back into a relationship that was lost. Along that journey, we have stopped this summer to witness just a few moments. We have seen God call a man, Abram, to go and live in a new land in a new way, and that man answered God’s call and lived in the land of Canaan as a stranger. We have seen God promise Abraham to make of him a great nation who will be a blessing to all the people of the earth, a nation whose numbers would be more than the sands on the seashore. We have seen the child of the promise of God born to Abraham and Sarah when their bodies were too old to bring forth a child. We have seen Abraham respond to God’s call to sacrifice Isaac, the child of promise, and seen his hand stopped by an angel of God when his heart was found by God to be willing to sacrifice his only son whom he loved. We have seen God guide a servant across the land to find a bride for Isaac and to bring forth new life, twins who could carry forward the covenant promise. We have seen one child despise his birthright and the other deviously seek it only to have God refine him and mold him so that he might carry the covenant promise forward. We have witnessed twelve sons born to Jacob, and we have watched as ten of those sons sell the favored one, Joseph, into slavery. And we have witnessed God bring good out of evil and provide for Israel in Egypt, redeeming

the sons of Jacob to each other and restoring the son who was dead and is now alive who will provide for Israel's family. And now we have witnessed a promise to bring the nation of Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land at the time when God remembers Israel.

Along our journey, we have witnessed moments where a future kingdom, one not made by human hands, will be brought forth by God and a blessing to all the nations of the world will arrive. We have seen moments when the text we heard has led us to new insights into the one to come from the tribe of Judah to lead us not into a promised land but into a promised kingdom, the kingdom of God. We have caught glimpses of Jesus fulfilling the promises of God and making a way for us to experience the steadfast love of God extended to us as grace. And as we have journeyed, I hope that we have begun to learn more of the story of our ancestors and developed a willingness to tell that story to others. We have seen God's hand working through the actions of humanity to bring about a nation that will be a blessing to all the people of the earth. That story is not over. There is more to come. A time will come when God will remember Israel. Until we have time to hear that story, I hope that we will tell everyone the astonishing things that God's word holds for them as we seek to be those who tell the story of our ancestors. May God give us courage to share this story with everyone we meet.

Pray with me: Father, we thank you that we have been able to journey with our ancestors and to learn some of their story. Lord, give us hearts that are open to tell the story of our ancestors to others. Open our eyes to see those who do not know of your steadfast love and to find new ways to share with them the great good news of how God brought forth a nation that is a blessing to all the nations of the earth. We thank you, Lord, for giving us this gift. Help us to live as a people who are part of your new kingdom, right here, right now. Amen.