

Faith Reformed Church
Stevensville, Ontario
January 4, 2009
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 11:20-22
Sermon: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

This morning we are getting back to our study of the Letter to the Hebrews. Before Advent we had started in on Hebrews 11, a chapter which examines the faith and the faithful. We began by looking at Abel and the worship of faith. Abel came before the Lord to worship in the way the Lord required: he brought the firstfruits of his flock, a blood sacrifice, a sign pointing to the death of Jesus as our substitute. We continued with Enoch and the walk of faith. What a blessed and intimate relationship developed between God and Enoch—and what a spur for us, to commune with God through prayer and Bible study. In Noah we saw the work of faith. For some 100 years Noah laboured on his ark, obeying the Lord in spite of the decades of mockery and jests made at his expense. It took us three weeks to look at the faith of Abraham, the man the Bible calls the “father of the faithful.” In the life of Abraham we saw the call of faith when God commanded him to leave his country and his people and to go to a land he would show him (Genesis 12:1). We saw the promise of faith given to Abraham when God granted him a son even though he and Sarah were both well past the age of having children. And we saw the test of faith when God commanded Abraham to take his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved, to

a mountaintop in Moriah and there sacrifice him as a burnt offering (Genesis 22).

Today we are moving on, but before we look at the lesson itself, let me put things into context. When God established his covenant with Abraham, the covenant included Abraham's descendants. In Genesis 17:7 God says to Abraham,

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

The covenant included Abraham's posterity and so when we move past Abraham in Hebrews 11 we are not meeting a random collection of people but the generations that came from him. We are going to meet Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, Abraham's son, grandson and great grandson.

Let's meet Isaac first. Our lesson begins, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future." Isaac was the child of the promise born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. He was the son Abraham had bound on Mount Moriah in order to sacrifice before the Angel of the Lord had stayed his hand. And he was the son through whom God reaffirmed the covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 26:2 and following we read,

The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...

Now to be perfectly frank Isaac was not the boldest man of faith. His life, for the most part, proved to be uneventful. Most of the biblical record concerning Isaac has to do with the passing of his blessing on to his sons Jacob and Esau. Let me start at the beginning. Isaac married Rebekah. She had trouble conceiving, for she was barren. Isaac prayed to the Lord and God answered. She became pregnant with twins. Because the babies seemed to be fighting in her womb, Rebekah went to the Lord to find out what was happening. This is what the Lord said:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.

Rebekah gave birth to two sons. The firstborn was Esau. He was a hairy little baby. The second born was Jacob. When he was born he came out of the womb hanging on to Esau’s heel.

Now Isaac and Rebekah both knew that God’s blessing was meant to fall upon Jacob. Rebekah was happy with that arrangement, but Isaac had a

problem. You see, Esau grew up to be his favourite. Esau was a man's man—a man a father could be proud of. He was strong, robust, a hunter and good provider. Jacob, on the other hand, was a momma's boy who hung around the tents clinging to his mother's apron strings. When the time came for Isaac to bestow his blessing—he had grown old and weak and blind—he determined in spite of what God had said to give it to Esau. He called his son Esau to his side and said,

I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.

What Isaac didn't know was that his wife was eavesdropping. When she heard what her husband was up to she ran to her son Jacob, covered his hands and arms with goatskin, gave him Esau's clothes to wear, prepared a meal just the way that Isaac liked it, and sent him in to Isaac pretending to be Esau so he could steal the blessing. The Bible says,

Jacob went close to his father Isaac who touched him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau. So he blessed him....

May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.

Not too long after Esau returned with a meal for his father. He went in to his tent to ask for the blessing that he had been promised. Isaac realized what had happened. And it was not just that Jacob had fooled him. Isaac came to see that he had been trying to overcome the decree of the Lord and that God would not put up with it. God's purpose would stand. God would do all that he pleased. What he said he would bring about; what he planned, he would do. (Isaiah 46:10, 11). Isaac understood his foolishness. It says in Genesis 27:33 that when Isaac understood what had happened "He trembled violently." There are some who say that it is at this point that Isaac was truly converted. It was here that he submitted himself fully to God's plans and purposes. I think they are right. Isaac refused to revoke the blessing he had given Jacob and the blessing he did give Esau was exactly in line with what God had decreed. Isaac said to Esau, "You will serve your brother." It was not the blessing Esau had anticipated but it is a blessing rendered in faith by Isaac and it was for this reason our author was able to write, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future."

The next descendant of Abraham on our list is Jacob. Our lesson says of him, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." Jacob led a life that left

much to be desired. He tricked his father and stole Esau's blessing. He was forced to flee because Esau wanted to kill him. He in turn was tricked by Laban, his father-in-law, but in the end got the upper hand by tricking him out of great flocks. On doing this, once more he was forced to flee. He finally stopped running after wrestling with God all night long by the Jabbok River. He finally submitted himself. His name was changed from Jacob—the supplanter or deceiver—to Israel—he struggles with God. From that time on he lived for the most part as a model of faith.

The time came for Jacob—as it had for his father before him—to bless his sons. The family had come to Egypt in a time of famine. Joseph had risen to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. You know the story. In any event, Jacob called his children to his side and blessed them. He had a double blessing for Joseph, for he blessed Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Before that happened, however, Jacob made Joseph give him a promise. We find the story in the final verses of Genesis 47:

Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years, and the years of his life were a hundred and forty-seven. When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favour in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried."

"I will do as you say," he said.

“Swear to me,” he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

That, beloved, is a wonderful picture of faith. Jacob’s main concern is that he be buried in Canaan. Now this is not a matter of superstition, nor is it a question of simply wanting to be buried where his family members were buried. Take a look at the big picture. God had promised great things to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He had promised to bless them and make them into a great nation. He had promised that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore. He had promised to send a Messiah through them, a Redeemer who would bless all the nations of the world. And he had promised to give them a land that would be their possession forever. These promises were almost always given together. They were, you could say, part of a package. When Jacob asked to be buried in Canaan, it was as if he were saying that he continued, even with death approaching, to stand upon the promises of God. He wanted his body to lie in the Promised Land, where one day God would again bring the Hebrew people and where the Messiah would be eventually born so that the work of redemption could be completed.

Having made his stand upon the promises of God he leant upon his staff to worship, his strength all but gone. The staff was a sign of Jacob’s pilgrimage. William Lane wrote, “Jacob’s final act of worship, leaning upon

the top of his staff, was characteristic for one who lived his life as a stranger and sojourner.” Like his grandfather before him, he was “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

Last we have the story of Joseph. Our author writes, “By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.” The story of Joseph is full of passion, intensity, suspense and excitement. He was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, ending up in Egypt. He rose in the ranks at Potiphar’s house, only to be falsely accused of rape and thrown into a dungeon. He interpreted dreams with the help of God and, after telling Pharaoh what was going to happen, was put in charge of Egypt, seeing that nation through seven years of plenty and seven years of drought. And it was through his work of averting disaster in the season of famine that he managed to save his family—the family through whom the Messiah would come to bless the world. Given all of those amazing adventures, it seems somewhat strange for our author to focus on the disposition of his bones. He does so for a reason, however.

Think of this. When Joseph died he could have been put in a coffin and returned to Canaan for immediate burial. He could easily have made that arrangement. It's impossible to imagine such a request being denied him given his high status in the Egyptian court. Now he wanted his body to be returned to Canaan to be buried with his fathers eventually, but not immediately. Why? Joseph knew dark days were coming for his people. God had said to his great grandfather Abraham,

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

He also knew that God would eventually rescue them from their slavery and hardship, for God has also said, "But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions."

What does that have to do with Joseph's burial arrangements? Joseph thought that his bones could be used to provide encouragement for those who were left behind. You see, Joseph's bones were not buried. His coffin was not deposited in a tomb or pyramid. His coffin stood above ground, awaiting its removal to Canaan at the right time. To every Israelite slave who would look at it during Israel's long captivity, it bore witness to the day of deliverance that had been promised by God.

F. B. Meyer talks about this. He writes,

What a lesson must those unburied bones have read to Israel! When the taskmasters dealt hardly with the people, so that their hearts fainted, it must have been sweet to go and look at the mummy case which held those moldering remains, waiting there to be carried forward; and, as they did so, this was doubtless their reflection, “Evidently, then, Joseph believed that we were not to stay here always but that we should sooner or later leave for Canaan; let us brace ourselves up to bear a little longer, it may be only a very little while!”

Yes, and when some were tempted to settle down content with prospering circumstances and to feast upon leeks, garlicks and onions, it was a check on them to think of those bones and say, “Evidently we are not to remain here always; we should do well not to build all our hopes and comfort on the unstable tenure of our sojourn in this place.”

And oftentimes, when the people were ready to despair amid the difficulties and weariness of their desert march, those bones borne in their midst told them of the confident hope of Joseph—that God would bring them to the land of rest.

God did bring his people out of Egypt, and when he did, the bones of Joseph accompanied the people and eventually were buried in Canaan at Shechem.

The Bible says that when Moses left Egypt, he “took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath.” The Book of Joshua, which is the story of the Israelites settling down in the Promised Land, closes by saying, “And Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem.”

In the opening verse of Hebrews 11 we are told that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” That is what each of these three men exemplified. They trusted in unseen realities. They trusted in promises made to them by God. They trusted in promises made tangible to them through faith. And they trusted in those unseen realities even as they stood on the verge of death. Our author writes about these three men as their lives are coming to an end and we find them facing their approaching deaths with calm serenity. You see, as they face death they know that God has a plan that cannot be manipulated and will not fail. They know that God plans to bless them and that even when people intend to harm them, God intends it all for their good. Now it is true that these three did not have an opportunity to read the psalms, and so they were not encouraged by the 27th:

The Lord is my light and my salvation—
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
Of whom shall I be afraid?
When evil men advance against me
To devour my flesh,
When my enemies and my foes attack me,
They will stumble and fall.
Though an army besiege me,
My heart will not fear;
Though war break out against me,
Even then will I be confident.

They would be years in the grave before Jeremiah would bring this word of the Lord:

“For I know that plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 27)

And it was centuries after that the Apostle Paul inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote to the Corinthians for a second time:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (II Corinthians 4)

But God had given them great promises and in the end they clung to them with their whole heart.

Beloved, God has given us much; in fact, he has given us much more than he gave to these patriarchs. They were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah and his death and resurrection on their behalf. We can look back to see the earthly ministry of the Messiah accomplished through his death, resurrection and ascension. They stood upon promises made by God; we are to stand on promises fulfilled by God in Jesus Christ.

The New Year is upon us. We cannot know the details of what it will hold for us. But whatever it brings, the decrees of God will stand firm and the promises of God will be kept and you and I will have an opportunity to bear witness of Jesus Christ and serve him in his kingdom work. Step out in faith. Trust in the Lord with glad and cheerful hearts. Shine with the love of Christ that his name would be praised, honoured and glorified. In Christ's name. AMEN.