

First Presbyterian Church
Gen. 49:29-50:10, 22-26, “The End of an Era”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, Sep. 3rd, 2023

Sylvia Beach, an American expatriate, owned a bookshop in Paris called, “Shakespeare and Company” in the 1920s and 30s.

According to Vanity Fair, “her bookshop and lending library became a hangout for Lost Generation writers such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce.” She would even hold their mail for them if they needed to correspond through a local address.

Because publishers in Britain and America deemed one of Joyce’s books to be too obscene, Beach published it herself.

It was the only book she ever published, entitled, *Ulysses*,
which is considered by some to be the greatest novel of all time.

If you’re only going to publish one book, make it the greatest of all time, right?

Shakespeare and Co. was a symbol of the times, a place of connection, collaboration, free-thinking, and discovery for Paris in the 1920s and 30s.

In 1941, Nazis occupied Paris and threatened Sylvia Beach.

She closed Shakespeare and Company under threat of violence.

It was the end of an era. The closure of something
so vital and vibrant was a symbol for Paris and the world
of the dark days to come.

A place of blessing was stricken with a curse.

Genesis is a story of God’s incredible blessing even when facing a curse.

God blessed the universe in creation and chose Adam and Eve
to be covenant partners. That’s an amazing blessing!

Then came the curse of sin and its consequence.

But God didn’t stop blessing. God blessed Abel and his sacrifice.

Then came the curse of murder by Abel’s brother Cain.

Cain’s sin became a paradigm for all of humanity.

But God didn't stop blessing. God blessed Noah and his family,
giving them the insight needed to be saved from the great flood.

But God didn't stop blessing. God chose new covenant partners
in Abraham and Sarah – promising their descendants
to become a great nation on land that God would give them,
a large region known as *Caanan*.

Then Abraham and Sarah faced the curse of being childless.
But God didn't stop blessing – they gave birth to Isaac.

This pattern continues all the way through the book of Genesis until we reach
the end of an era.

The last people who hear directly of God's promise in Genesis are
Isaac's son Jacob (the grandson of Abraham),
and Joseph (the favorite son of Jacob).
Joseph also had a life demonstrating God's continued blessing
even after his brother's had sold him into slavery.
The blessing came through finding favor
with Egypt's supreme ruler, Pharaoh.

After Jacob and Joseph, it will be a long time before the Hebrew people
have tangible evidence of God's blessing.
400 years will go by under the heavy hand of slavery in Egypt –
that's 20 generations of Hebrew experience without God's blessing.

The passage we read today not only comes at the end of the book of Genesis,
it marks the end of an era.
The death of Jacob the patriarch and Joseph his son
marked the end of an era.

Yahweh promised them to become a great nation
that would inherit the promised land but instead
they were left in Egypt without someone to champion their cause
before Pharaoh.

Today we will zoom in on this "end of an era" moment which is
carefully described in Genesis 49 and 50.
This passage sets the table for the book of Exodus
which we will study from September through November.

The Hebrew writers used literary structure as a hallmark of their style
in ways that are beautiful, purposeful,
and which reveal their theological emphasis.

SLIDE (with the below text) Chart by Nicholas Lunn

- A1 The last words and death of Jacob (49:29-50:3)
Jacob: "I am about to be gathered to my people"
burial plans, ancestors named
- B1 Joseph's appeal to Pharaoh (50:4-6)
Father's wishes, appeal is granted.
- C The funeral of Jacob (50:7-14)
Narrative about moving from Egypt to Canaan and back to Egypt
- B2 The brothers' appeal to Joseph (50:15-21)
Father's wishes, appeal is granted.
- A2 The last words and death of Joseph (50:22-26)
Joseph: "I am about to die."
burial plans, patriarchs named

At the edges, the structure of this passage shows how the death of Jacob is
connected to the death of Joseph.

SLIDE (with A1 / A2 in red)

In "A1" we see that Jacob says, in 49:29 and following
"I am about to be gathered to my people."

Then he gives instructions for where he should be buried:

In the cave near Mamre in Canaan (that's an important place in this story!)
where Abraham and Sarah were buried,
where Isaac and Rebekah were buried,
and where Jacob himself buried his wife Leah.

So Jacob draws his feet into his bed (what a poetic line)
breathes his last and was gathered to his people.

What if we thought of death as being gathered to our people?
Joseph, weeps, hugs and kisses his father
and the physicians embalm him for 40 days.

Now at the end of the next chapter marked on the screen at A2,
we see that Joseph lives to be 110 years old
and says to his family (dwelling in Egypt),
“I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid
and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath
to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”
He dies and is embalmed. And the very last words of the book of Genesis read,
“And he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.”

It’s an interesting line. In years to come when a new Pharaoh
was enthroned who didn’t remember Joseph, all the Hebrew people
would think they had been placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Do you see the strong echoes in these outside passages
which I am calling A1 and A2?

Now let’s go one layer toward the middle. B1 and B2

SLIDE (with B1 / B2 in red)

In B1, after Jacob dies in Egypt, his son Joseph makes an appeal to Pharaoh.
He tells Pharaoh the story and the requests that Jacob his father had made:
To be buried in the land of Canaan
(the land Yahweh had promised to Abraham and Sarah).

In 50:6 Pharaoh says, “Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do.”
So let’s compare that with B2.

In 50:15, upon Jacob’s death, Joseph’s brothers
(who had sold him into slavery)
make an appeal to Joseph based on Jacob’s wishes.
They say to Joseph “Your father (Jacob) left instructions
to forgive your brothers the sins they committed intreating you badly.
Please forgive your servants!” And Joseph wept.

But their words find favor with Joseph who grants their appeal –
he says “You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done.
Don’t be afraid.”

Taken together we can see that in B1
Jacob's deathbed wish is granted by Pharaoh.
in B2

Jacob's deathbed wish is granted by Jacob.
SLIDE (with C in red, A1 / A2 in green)

At the center we have section C, found in 50:7-14.

This is the middle of this literary design that we've been going through.

Now, you need to realize that a large portion of the stories
in the Hebrew Bible are told like this.

This isn't unique!

This is how their minds organized stories to make them meaningful.
In the Hebrew mind the center of the pattern is of extra importance.

What do we find here? The burial of Jacob, the patriarch.

A momentous occasion, to be sure.

But it's not only the burial of Jacob the son of Isaac
the son of Abraham.

There is a momentous movement of this family between
the land of promise and the land of Egypt.

It is the final touchpoint for the family of promise Canaan, the land of promise
before this family enters into a proverbial coffin in Egypt.

This central portion, most meaningful structural focus point of the passage
begins with a huge number of people travelling
from out of Egypt into Canaan.

Joseph, Pharaoh, his officials, and all the dignitaries of Egypt,
and of course, Joseph's own family.

Then at the end we hear ... chariots and horsemen also went up with him.

Hmm...when else do we hear about Pharaoh and
Egyptian chariots and horsemen following after
a large group of Hebrew travelers?

Maybe some foreshadowing going on here?

They take seven days to mourn Jacob in the land of Canaan.

Jacob's sons – his 12 sons whose names are the 12 tribes of Israel! –
are said to carry him *to* the land of Canaan where they bury him
in the cave where Abraham and the other great ancestors
were buried.

Then we get to the last line in this central section:

Joseph together with his brothers and all the others, return to Egypt.

This is the end of an era. It's the end of the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it's also the end of this family's contact with the promised land for 400 years.

No wonder this passage is designed to focus the reader's attention right here.

God has blessed this family, to be sure, but they are now facing the end of an era. And there are signs that the future looks dark.

Over the next 12 week we will look at how things turn out in the book of Exodus.

What matters most when one era ends and another begins?

What are the eras you have seen end in your family?

In our society?

In your journey of faith,

when have you felt like a page has turned and nothing will be the same?

What is on the line? What are we worried about?

1) When we know who we are and what we care about, and carry on through the end of an era.

Knowing our identity and values.

The great strength of the Hebrew people comes from knowing that they are Yahweh's chosen people, and they value their relationship with Yahweh above everything else.

What are the things about you and your community that will not change no matter what?

Our core values at First Presbyterian are being

God Centered, Open, Loving, and Courageous.

Those values keep our congregation in step with what God is doing in us and in the world, no matter what we're facing.

2) We can make it through the end of an era

by letting go of what we are not able to control

There are a lot of things I wish I could control.

I wish I could stop climate change from bringing the end of an era.

I wish I could stop artificial intelligence from
bringing the end of an era.

I wish I could go back in time and stop the massive influx of money in elections
that has already brought about the end of an era.

However, these are not things I can control.

If we constant moan and complain about things out of our control
we will fail to notice that God is still ready to bless us.

I opened with the story of how Sylvia Beach was pressured by Nazi's
to close Shakespeare and Co.

She never opened it again... but in 1951, 10 years after it had closed,
a man named George Whitman gave it a second life.

George faithfully kept the shop going while living above it
until he died in at the age of 98.

His daughter (who is named Sylvia Beach Whitman after the original owner)
runs the shop today, and it remains as a highlight destination
for book lovers around the world.

Yes, times of darkness and trial come into our lives.

Eras of blessing come and go.

But our God, the God of promise,

the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

who calls us beloved children *never* tires of blessing.