

The End? - Sermon Based on Genesis 45:1-15
by David Hindman on Sunday, August 14, 2011

Summer ended at 6:00 a.m. today when football camp began for 100+ Yellow Jackets. Life won't be the same for those guys until football ends November 12 and The Game.

But is that really the end? It's early in the morning but work with me, OK? Football fields have two end zones where the field ends (duh!); past the end zone you're out of bounds.

Whatever happens there doesn't count, no matter how spectacular. But it's also an end zone because that's where you want to get; it's your goal. The purpose and end of all that grunting and shoving is to get the ball into that zone; whoever does that the best wins the game. In other words the end is also a goal to be reached, a purpose to be achieved. So what's the end of the football season? Is it November 12? Or to win *The Game*? Coach Arruzo will tell you the real end of Jacket ball is to produce men of character who'll be solid, responsible members of the community. The next four years we may win four games or 40, but for Coach the end zone that really matters is filled with good husbands and dads who not only know how to play a game but how to live noble lives. The end goal is young men excelling off the field even more than on it.

Today we end our journey through Genesis. This summer we had adventures with faith ancestors Abraham and Sarah and their long-awaited son Isaac; followed by tales of Isaac and Rebekah and their twin boys Esau and Jacob; and then stories of Jacob's and his two wives, two concubines and 12 sons and a daughter. Last week's encounter was with Jacob's boys now become men and the terrible relationship between the teenaged dreamy Joseph and his older brothers. Fed up with little Joe's uppity ways, they send him on the ultimate road trip to Egypt. His story there includes serving as a slave to a government official and time in the slammer when wrongfully accused of rape. In prison Joseph interprets a prisoner's dream and gives him the happy news that in three days he's walking out a free man to return to his job of serving

Pharaoh. Joseph asks him not to forget Joseph when he's free, but he does. Two long years later Pharaoh dreams about fat cows and skinny cows, fat and scrawny heads of grain. Suddenly the former inmate remembers Joseph and tells Pharaoh about his dream gift. Joseph's brought to Pharaoh, tells him there's going to be seven years of huge harvests followed by seven years of famine and Pharaoh's so impressed he puts Joseph in charge of Egypt's food supplies so they'll survive the coming lean times.

Eventually the famine spreads beyond Egypt to Canaan where Joseph's brothers and father still live. They hear the rumor that Egypt has food to spare so they go in desperate hope. When they meet Joseph they don't recognize him but he knows who they are. He toys with them, says they're spies and throws them into prison for a few days. They're all released but one will be held hostage in Egypt until the others return with their youngest brother Benjamin. Talking among themselves the brothers say they're being punished for treating Joseph so horribly years earlier. Unknown to them Joseph understands what they're saying. He steps away overcome by emotion and the realization his brothers have changed and are truly sorry for their past acts. When the food received eventually runs out the brothers return to Egypt bringing brother Benjamin. Finally after more tricks and twists and turns in the story Joseph tells his brothers who he is. Of course they're stunned and terrified at what Joseph might do, but in the end, they are all reconciled, Jacob is brought to Egypt to see his long lost son and they all move to Egypt as Pharaoh's special guests where they all live happily ever after.

So is that the story's end? Not really; eventually they all die including Pharaoh. In the Bible's next story book we learn that a new king arose in Egypt who knew not Joseph. Now the story of blessing and life becomes a tale of slavery and suffering that will go on until God uses a

man named Moses to bring them out of Egypt into the Promised Land of freedom and life. So this isn't the end but the close of a chapter of a much longer story of hardship and hope and life.

The story ends here with the family reunited and living peaceably together. But the real end and purpose is a story about saving life, not just Joseph's family, but Egypt's. Joseph's brothers intended to do him harm and meant evil for him. They sold him into slavery. They lied to their dad that Joseph was killed by a fierce wild beast. When they learn Joseph is alive they know full well he has every right to take revenge on them and make their lives miserable for doing such awfully horrible things. Joseph doesn't downplay their wickedness or excuse it or say "never mind." Joseph bluntly but graciously says, "You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good to preserve the lives of many who are alive today because of what happened." In the midst of terrible deeds and demonic attitudes God was at work for good, to save and preserve life. That's the story's real end: to tell us God's relentless purpose always is to save and preserve life. As Jesus says in the New Testament, "I have come that you may have life, life in all its fullness." That's the end of this story; it's the end of the Bible story; it's the end of our story as God's ways become ours. Through the challenges and difficulties of his life, Joseph's ways become the ways of God: they're both in the business of saving lives for good. That's what really matters in the end. And that saving love is not just for a special few but for *all* God's children, including Egyptians, those who are different or live beyond the borders of our small circle of care. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob saves them for sure. But in addition to Jacob's family a ton of Egyptians will be saved, too. Through the prophet Isaiah God says, "My ways are not your ways; my thoughts are not yours." Apparently God is most gracious with wide arms; we have much yet to learn as we become more holy.

In the end, Joseph's life is saved, too, not just physically but spiritually. Joseph could have become bitter, resentful, filled with wrath and poison and overcome by the desire to get even with his brothers. But by God's grace Joseph realized that God was at work in the midst of his pain and suffering. There was a greater plan and purpose for good behind and beyond his brothers' actions. Through it all God transformed Joseph from a self-centered, arrogant, spoiled and privileged boy into a wholly merciful man saving starving Egyptians and his own kith and kin, and being saved himself by God in the bargain.

That same promise of transformation and blessing is God's gift to us as well. Trust that even in times of awful hardship and struggle God still works in our ordinary lives doing unexpected acts of mercy and life. Though it all God can change and bless us, even when the end is not immediately near or clear. God's workings are often seen through life's rear-view mirror. Looking back we see God's gracious hand preserving life and bringing new beginnings. Thirty years ago I was appointed pastor of Hanover's Lebanon United Methodist Church. At first I was angry and disillusioned and hurt. I was going through a divorce and this demotion was punishment by my DS older brothers and bishop. I drove up Peaks Road on a May afternoon thinking, "Oh my God, there's nothing out here. But moments later returning down the road, the thought came, "And this is exactly where you need to be." What I thought was meant for evil God meant for good, to save and preserve life, including my own. The God we meet in scripture is always at work for good, sometimes in spite of us, sometimes through us; sometimes hidden and unknown; always active and near at hand. In ancient words of faith our end and purpose is to glorify and enjoy God for ever and to know that finally all will be well, all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well, thanks be to God.