

Life Among the Exiles
Genesis 50:22-26, John 17:13-19
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
November 12, 2006
Pastor Dave Carver

Many of you will remember Mrs. Church, who lived right down the street from us on Cumberland Street. For some reason, in addition to being one of the nicest, most loving, faithful, and generous people that I've ever met, when I first met Mae she also struck me as one of the oldest people I ever saw. I don't know why that was, but she just seemed timeless to me. One day we were talking about the neighborhood and the congregation and changes that were taking place and I said something like, "I'm sure that for someone like you, who has always been here..." but before I could finish the sentence she cut me off. "Oh, no, Dave!" she said, "I haven't always been at this church. No, I used to be at another church. In fact, I don't think that I came to this church until 1929!"

My jaw dropped. Oh, I see...you haven't always been here...just since **before** the Great Depression, the dustbowl, and FDR.

I remembered that story about Mae, and I smiled at her photo in my study, when I read this week's selection from Genesis. We have finally arrived at the end of this book. Where does the story end? In Egypt, right? For a number of weeks, we've been keeping track of Joseph and seeing how God has been at work in his story. Who can tell me how old Joseph was when he left Canaan and went to Egypt? Seventeen. Great. Are there any 17 year-olds here? Stand up, please. Now, who can tell me how old Joseph was when he dies? One hundred and ten. Are there any 110 year olds here? Stand up...oh, I see. A young crowd this morning...Okay, my point is this. Imagine, if you will, seventeen year old Eve standing here and announcing that she is moving away. She's leaving Crafton Heights and will be gone for, say, NINETY-THREE YEARS! But don't worry, she says. I won't forget you. I'll always be true to Crafton Heights.

But that's what happens in Joseph's life, isn't it? He spends more than nine decades living in Egypt – first as a slave, then a prisoner, and then as the Vice-ruler of the land. But he ends his life asking for one thing: please don't bury me here! Why does that matter to Joseph? Because he's not an Egyptian. He's a child of the promise.

On September 4, 2005 I preached the first sermon in this series on Genesis. In that message, and in many weeks since, we've talked about the fact that this is a book addressed to people who ask "WHY?": why am I here? Why was I created? Why do I have gifts or challenges or hopes or fears like the ones that I have? We've talked about the fact that God created the world to be a good place, and have seen how sin and brokenness come in and mar, or distort, the Creator's intentions. And we've heard the promises, haven't we: God says that he will keep hope alive. That he will send help. That he will save his people and his creation.

We've traced a thread through Genesis that connects Adam and Eve, and Noah, and the tower of Babel and the call to Abram and Sarai. We've watched Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob grow up. We've been torn apart by the stories of

Dinah and Tamar. We've seen God's faithfulness in Joseph's life.

During much of the past year, I've had regular conversations with a devout Jewish woman. Most of you probably know that the Jews accept what we call the Old Testament as the Bible – we share a great deal of our stories with them. When she found out that I was preaching through Genesis, she was very curious. She always asked what stories I was talking about in worship. This past week, she said, "You know, Pastor Dave, I am just curious. How do you, a Christian, read Genesis? Isn't it just Genesis to you? I mean, Jesus isn't there, is he?"

I thought for a moment, and I said, "Well, as a Christian I have to say that there are certainly things about Genesis that remind me of Jesus, and I can see things in Genesis that point me towards Jesus. But this week, I'm thinking that one of the central messages of Genesis is to remind God's people that they are called to be a special people – that we are not like everyone else."

She laughed and said, "Hey, that's exactly how we read it!" Exactly. People of faith come to this text to learn, again, that we are given our identity as children of God – that God alone can tell us what is right and real and important. That God gets to tell us who we are.

Today's reading puts the "capper" on our study of Genesis by bringing that message home to us one last time. Here we see Joseph, who is waiting...for what? What is Joseph waiting for here? To die...and he's also waiting for God to show up, right? "God will visit you", he says. And then, he names the promise for the first time – this promise that God is providing his people with a home, a name, a savior – Joseph gives utterance to that promise for the first time on his deathbed. And he makes them promise – don't leave my bones here. Bury me at home. And his bones then become a witness to every Israelite in Egypt for the next 400 years. Where are we? What is the last word in the book of Genesis? We are in Egypt. But we are not yet where we are going to be. The book of Genesis ends with people who are waiting on God to keep his promises; people who are holding out, holding on, knowing that there is something else coming.

Our New Testament reading, from the Gospel of John, has the same idea. The visitation from God that Joseph talked about HAS come. Jesus has come to be with his people. And here he is praying for his friends and followers, the disciples. What is he praying for, specifically? That God would "consecrate" or "sanctify" or set them aside for something incredible. Jesus is asking God to use the disciples for something special. Why?

Verse 18: "As the Father has sent the Son into the world, so I am sending them into the world..." Jesus, praying for his followers and for us, says, "Look, God, keep these folks clean...keep them open...set them aside, because they are a part of something huge. Just like you sent me into the world, I'm going to send them into the world.

We are NOT like everyone else in the world any more than Joseph was like the other Egyptians or Jesus was like the Romans. We, the church of Jesus Christ, are set aside to be LIKE CHRIST in the world. That is, we are sent to be agents of love, forgiveness, hope, justice, and healing. We are sent to be witnesses to the power and authority of God.

Sure, we live in Crafton Heights, or in Jerusalem, or in Egypt. But we are not FROM here. Our home is in the promises of God. Does that make sense to you? We are here, but we answer to God. We have addresses here, but our true citizenship is with Christ.

So what? What the heck difference does that make to you at Montour HS or the VA Administration building or wherever you expect to be in the days to come? How do we live that truth out? How do we live like people who are sent by God into this culture and this community?

We have two great resources that help us here. Two of the most important resources to all Americans: money and time. Last week, we talked a bit about money. I have a hunch that'll show up again next week, too. Today, I want to ask you how you invest your time and your energy?

Ask almost anyone that you meet, "Hey, how are things?" and I'm betting that at least half the time you'll hear the answer, "Oh, I'm all right. Busy, though. Really busy." You ask someone if they can give you a hand with a project, and so often your friend will look and say, "Can it wait until Thursday? I'm free for an hour then..."

Parenthetically, I have to say that I find it amusing that in a nation full of so many people who are so busy so much of the time; that in a culture where people say that their time is perhaps their most valuable resource, that last Sunday evening 22.6 million Americans found an hour to watch *Desperate Housewives*, or that nearly the same number of us can't miss Tuesday's installment of *Dancing With The Stars*.

But I digress. We are a nation that says, over and over again, that what is important to us is our time. That what we value are the hours and minutes of each day. Do you want to know what matters to me? Look at my calendar and look at my checkbook. You'll see, right?

And there's that pesky Jesus sitting over there in the corner, praying, "As the Father has sent me into the world, so I am sending you into the world..."

"Yeah, yeah, hang on a second, Jesus! I'm just getting to the next level in *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. I'll be there as soon as I get this new X-Box figured out...Hold your horses, Jesus! Didn't you see that new Will Farrel movie just came out on DVD? Sheesh..."

All right, I know that I'm skating on thin ice here. Want to see my calendar? I fish. I garden. I play. Who am I to be pointing fingers at anybody else?

Oh, beloved, I am NOT pointing fingers at anyone else. I'm not. I'm not holding myself up as a model Christian, as one who is perfect.

I didn't write any of this stuff – I'm just trying to make sense out of what Jesus is saying. I'm asking you, do you want to be a child of the promise? Do you want to get in on what God is doing in Christ? And if you do, does that show in the choices you are making concerning your time and your energy? Remember, you are not trying to make me happy here...I'm just asking the

question. It's Jesus who seems to be pretty concerned about the answer.

Here's what I think. I think that a few of the people in this room are probably doing too much. Some of you are going crazy, adding one more responsibility onto an overloaded schedule because you feel guilty or because you think that someone – me, Jesus, John, Beebe, Barb, Adam – will like you better because you said “yes” to something that you can't really do well.

But as John Ed Mathison said in *The Treasures of the Transformed Life*, in a lot of churches there is the 80/20 rule. Twenty percent of the people do eighty percent of the work. And there are some folks in this room who could afford to “step it up” a bit in the ways that they think about the time that God has given to them.

It's not about “pulling your weight”. As we said last week, God doesn't need us to get his work done – it'll happen through us or in spite of us. It's about becoming able to be the person that God has made you to be.

Next Sunday we'll have “commitment Sunday” here at the church. You've received in the mail a card asking you to make a financial commitment, and also a paper asking you about some of the specific ways that you can use your time and your energy to participate in the work of God in Christ. Will you do that? Will you really look at that list and see what you can do to grow in your ability to be a part of what God is doing in this neighborhood and in this faith community? Will you pray over that list with the list in one hand and your calendar in the other?

It'll cost you. I know. I've got a shelf of computer games. I've got stacks of magazines. I've got more VCR tapes than I know what to do with...stuff I'm going to “get around to”. Being generous with your time has a cost.

But it will also change you and bless you, too. More than I can say, giving your heart away to the things that God calls us to is a way of shaping our lives to reflect his perfect love. Think about the time you spend. Think about the responsibilities and hobbies, the amusements and occupations you have. And see if there is a way to use some of that time to live more fully into the promises of God. You are not like the other kids, you know. You are a servant of the king. Live into that commission today and in the days to come. Amen.