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Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 22, 2010
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Our First Families of Faith
Stories from the Book of Genesis
X. Not the Last Thing

Genesis 45:1-15 1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. 4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' 12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." 14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Frederick Buechner is a world-famous author, poet, professor and Christian minister. But Rev. Buechner did not grow up in a churchgoing family. His German ancestors who came to this country in the 1850s called themselves "free-thinkers" and they were convinced of the truth of atheism. Buechner's ancestors were very successful

financially and socially, but religion was something they simply dismissed. As it turned out, though, this meant that the whole family, down through the generations, had no resources on which to fall back when life worked them over. Buechner's first-hand experience of those lack of resources in the face of life's evil and tragedy began when he was ten years old. On a Saturday morning in November of 1936, he had expected to go with his father on a trip back to Princeton University, from where his father had graduated. However, because of the Great Depression, his father had not been able to find or keep the kind of job that he thought befitting of someone of his status and his education. Unfortunately, he had begun to rely on alcohol as a way of compensating for his disappointment. But, of course, that only made the problem worse. So on this particular day when they were to go back to see the old classmates, the Buechner's father got up before anybody else in the family, dressed, went down to the garage, carefully closed the garage door, turned the ignition of the old Chevrolet, sat down on the running board, and asphyxiated himself before anybody in the family realized what was happening.

Years later, people used to ask Rev. Buechner, *"How did your father die?"* Buechner would always say, *"He died of heart trouble."* Then he would go on to say, *"That's at least partially true. You see, he had a heart and it was troubled."* After his father's suicide, the Buechner family lived on as best they could. Young Frederick went on, as his father had, to Princeton, and then became an English teacher at a prestigious private high school and he published a novel that was a huge critical success. It looked like he was going to have a very bright future. In fact, it appeared so bright that he resigned his teaching position and began to write full-time. Then he had

that mysterious malady that too often happens to writers. Writer's block. Nothing would come. He would stare at the paper in the typewriter for hours on end. He became very, very despondent, very depressed; he wondered if he was going to recapitulate his father's life story – and, like his father, he had nowhere to turn, nothing to hold him up, nothing on which to lean. During that terrible time, though, one of his friends said him, *"You might like to go to Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. There is a wonderful minister there named George Buttrick. He gives hope, he gives energy. You might find what he is doing to be helpful."* And even though Buechner had never really gone to church before, even though his family had been proudly atheist, he began attending worship.

Sure enough, this distinguished preacher did indeed begin to speak to his heart. One Sunday in the midst of a sermon, Buechner had a profound, visceral, deep sense that there was indeed something beyond him on which he could rely, which he could trust. It was a powerful experience for an avowed atheist, and because it was so powerful, Buechner made an appointment to see the preacher the following week. As they talked the minister could see the potential of this young writer. At that time the Rockefeller Foundation had a series of grants that they were giving to people who might, just might, be interested in the ministry, interested in studying about God and church and faith. So, even though he had not been in church over a dozen times in all his life, to his great amazement, Buechner enrolled at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and for the first time in his life encountered the Bible. It was a completely unknown realm to him before.

Buechner says as he began to study and learn of the Bible, he was amazed by

two things. First of all, there was the utter honesty of Scripture, where even the greatest heroes were depicted with all of their strengths but also their flaws. We have surely seen that in our series which we are closing today on our “first family of faith” in Genesis; we have seen that they are flawed, imperfect, full of foibles and hardly models of perfect behavior. But Buechner said even more significant to him was a theme that he began to discover as we worked his way through the pages of scripture: that with this God that the Bible portrayed, the seemingly ***worst things were never the last things***. *The worst things were never the last things*. God always seemed to have something else that God was able to do; God didn’t give up; God didn’t throw up the Divine Hands in disgust at the material to be worked with. In fact, the image of an alchemist is the image that came to Buechner. Alchemists, you remember, were those ancient scientists who tried to take lead and somehow change it into gold. Well, Buechner began to trace through Holy Scripture how again and again and again, when it seemed like people were at the absolute end of their ropes, this Alchemist God had a way of doing something even with the worst that human beings had done, with the worst that life could throw at them, with the worst that human beings could inflict on one another, and bring growth and even sometimes bring redemption. *The worst things were never the last things*.¹

Doesn’t that line ring so true as we have studied this summer our Genesis forebears? Think of where we have been and what we have seen. A flood that

¹I am deeply indebted with this story and in this sermon– using many of the phrasings and ideas – to the Rev. John Claypool http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/claypool_4523.htm

destroyed the earth. And yet that worst thing was not the last thing. A patriarch and matriarch, Abraham and Sarah, who were both faithful and feckless – a woman who asked her servant to be a surrogate mother by sleeping with her husband and then who made life hell for that woman and her child, and who pestered her sometimes spineless husband to send them both out into the desert to die when she no longer had need of them. The story could have ended with God giving up on these two – but the worst thing was not the last thing. And the story continues: son Isaac, both saintly and scarred from his parents' goodness and ghastliness becomes, with wife Rebecca, the parent of Jacob and Esau – the latter losing his blessing and his birthright not once but twice, and the former scheming, conniving, seemingly without scruples who quite willingly and even proudly stole that blessing and birthright. What a mess. And yet: even such terrible and tawdry things were not the last thing. The story goes on, and it seems that though Jacob grows up – a little – and learns repentance, and even though he reconciles with his brother Esau, in the end he manages to help create another terrible thing when he so favors his son Joseph that his brothers come to hate him badly enough that they would have killed him except for the fact that they were convinced to sell him into slavery! Can it possibly get worse? And yet: Even that worse thing was not the last thing.

Two weeks ago, we left Joseph in that slaver's caravan, bound for Egypt where one of the Egyptian officials named Potiphar bought him. To make a long story short, in Potiphar's household, for the very first in his life something was asked of Joseph. Potiphar gave him responsibilities and expected Joseph to carry out his duties well and faithfully. And he began to flourish in ways he likely would have never flourished if had

stayed the pampered parental pet. In fact, he was so effective he rose to be the head of Potiphar's household. Everything was going wonderfully for him, but then Potiphar's wife became sexually attracted to him and tried to seduce him. When he resisted her, she turned the table and accused him of the very thing that she had done to him. As a result, Joseph was taken out of Potiphar's household and put into a royal prison. Once again it seemed to be the absolute worst thing that could have happened; but it was not to be the last thing. Joseph became skilled there in the prison as an interpreter of dreams. When the Pharaoh, the King, was troubled by nightmares, someone remembered the young Hebrew in the jail. He was taken to Pharaoh and Joseph was able to help him understand that his dreams were saying that though the land was having times of wonderful abundance, they had to hold some of that abundance in reserve because a horrible famine was coming. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he let him out of prison and made him his Chief of Staff. And Joseph was able to store up enough of the affluence of that bountiful time that when the famine did come, Egypt became the bread basket of the Mediterranean basin. Jacob and his sons – Joseph's father and brothers – who were starving to death back up in Palestine, came down and, because of what Joseph had done, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah did not starve to death. The promise could and would continue.

And so at the end of this incredible multi-generational saga where the seemingly worst nonetheless was never the last, the brothers came to Joseph and apologized to him for all they had done. He said, *"Look, do not weep. You meant what you did for evil. That cannot be denied. But God used it for good."* This Alchemist God, to recur to Buechner's metaphor, never stops taking what we mucked-up human beings do, trying

to do something with it, trying to bring good from it in some fashion, and will not ever leave us adrift, alone, and unloved.

One pastor puts all of this way, when he says:

In the story of Joseph, we are assured that even the most blind, most cruel events have the potential to lead us to deeper springs of living water. How? We [learn] that God does not will hardship upon us, but God is with us through our hardship.... Whatever happens, God abides. ... Joseph suffered, as we all do. But the trust he had in God allowed him to walk out of the jail after two years with a clear head and interpret Pharaoh's troubling dream. It allowed Joseph, after unspeakable betrayal from his brothers, to say to them through unharnessed tears of relief and joy, "I am Joseph, your brother." ...²

Buechner is right: the story of our Genesis "first families of faith," from beginning to end, is the reminder, the assurance, the abiding truth that with God, the worst thing is never, ever the last thing; never, ever the last word.

Not long before his death at the age of 90, former English Prime Minister Winston Churchill was asked to give a commencement address. He had to be helped to the podium. He then hesitated so long that folks began to wonder if he was alright. Finally, he raised his head – that face whose force of will and eloquence had literally kept England alive during the worst of the Battle of Britain – and looked at those graduates and said this: "**Never, never, never give up.**" And then he turned and sat down. It is likely the only commencement address in human history still remembered word-for-word by those who were there. And while his was an exhortation to those

²<http://www.fccb.org/worship/sermonsPast/1990s/sermon960818.php>

graduates just beginning their lives, it could also serve as an oh-so-fitting description of God. For who can tell what this God, who seeks to make the things that are out of the things that are not, who can make dead things come alive again, might still be able to do with any situation? For the seemingly worse things are indeed never, never, never the last things, the last word, with this God. And that's why we can say, with conviction, *"Never, never, never give up – because hasn't, God doesn't, God won't."*

That is the good news for Noah, for Abraham and Sarah, for Isaac and Rebecca, for Esau, for Jacob and Rachel and Leah, for Joseph, for you, and for me. Amen.