

Message
September 3-4, 2011
Exodus 12:1-14 and Matthew 18:15-20
Hillary T. West

+Jesus, on this day, give me strength and courage to say and be what you call me to be.
May I always remember that my life is yours. Thank you for the opportunity to serve.
Help me obey. Amen. +

Gather children and invite them to sit on the floor near the platform.

Suppose all of us were to gather up and climb into a giant space ship and fly away to a new land. (We can all go, mommies and daddies, sisters and brothers, granddaddies and grandmommies, even our friends). We don't have to go very far, but far enough where things are new. When we arrive, we're greeted by a whole land of people we've never met before. They don't know us or know anything about us. After a while, these new people, having watched us help one another, and care for each other, and love one another, they want to know who we are and what we are. And, because we're faithful people, because we believe, we say "***we are children of God.***" (Who are we? We are ***children of God***).

The aliens ask, "***Children of God, what's that?***"

Well, we say, "***we come from God. Everything that is good and true and right, comes from God.***"

"***Why does God do this, they ask?***" "Well," we say, "***because, God loves us. And, to show us God's love, God came to us as Jesus Christ. Jesus lived with us. He helped, and healed, and made miracles happen. Most of all he taught us how to love, like God loves.***"

"***Wow,***" the aliens say. "***Then what happens in the story?***" "***Jesus died on the cross and then, God brought him back to life so we would know that nothing ever separates us from God's love. This is God's story for us. God's saving story.***"

"***We want to be like Jesus and love like God,***" the aliens say. "***How can we be a part of the story?***"

"***You are a part of the story, you are children of God,***" we say. "***God's story is everywhere for all who want to be in the story. So, don't forget, you are children of God, all the time, everywhere.***" Saying so long to our new friends, giving them a big hug, we pile back into our space ship and journey back to Short Pump, back to our neighborhoods, our households, our family and friends, remembering that we're all children of God and we've got things to do in God's story now...

So, here's how our story is going right now. For many of us, this weekend is a big time of change. Summer is almost over. We're starting school or about to start school. Some other change is happening. Jenna, our associate youth minister is going to be a special youth minister at another church in Richmond. I'm moving to Philadelphia next week to help tell God's story with St. Thomas Church. So, I'm saying good bye for now. I will miss you very much. And, I love you very much. But, remember, we're in God's story, we're always together, always connected, especially when we don't see one another. That's what it means to be children of God.

You are part of God's story and I need you to help me in telling the story of God's love with one another and those you meet, everywhere you go, ok? Miss Rebecca is going with you to chapel now and she'll help you have the words for helping God's story grow bigger and bigger...Let's stand up together and say a prayer before you go, just like we always do, ok? Let us pray...

Children go to chapel with Rebecca...

Today, let's just talk a little bit about our bigger story as children of God, often referred to as God's Salvation History.

What is the saying, the only certainty of life is change? I'd rather trump the statement with, "the only certainty in life is God's love." And, since the beginning of the beginning, God's ever saving love is our story; a God who listens, acts, frees, rescues, redeems and saves.

Children of God, God's covenant people, the Israelites, are enslaved by Egyptian forces who are trying their best to stop God's loving action. God's saving action does not stop and God's people will not stop. Called by God to be the voice of liberation for God's people, Moses tells Pharaoh, "God sent me to say, let my people go."

Pharaoh's heart is hardened against God's action as God brings down plague after plague. Water turns to blood, frogs clamber, mosquitoes swarm all over people and animals, the ground under their feet grows thick with horseflies, livestock are stricken, boils spread and break into sores on people and beasts, hail rains down, locusts cover the surface of the soil, thick darkness falls over all of Egypt, and Pharaoh, refusing to obey God's message, will not let the people go.

One last plague is promised. The climatic turn in the story, the firstborn child of every household in Egypt will perish. But, the Israelites will be saved. God tells Moses to tell the people. Pharaoh's heart is softened; he tells the people to go. Under clear instruction from God, they make plans to go.

God says, take a one year old, unblemished lamb from a flock of sheep or goats. If your household is not large enough to eat a whole lamb, find some friends to share in the story of God's saving grace. Then, slaughter the lamb, and cook it. Don't boil it. Roast it; every body part, and eat it with pita bread and bitter herbs. Eat all of it. No left overs. There won't be time to eat them anyway. Hurry. Because, says God, when it's time to

go, it's time to go. No waiting around. God knows, that when they go, Pharaoh will once again change his mind.

Before roasting the lamb, after the slaughter, take the blood of the lamb and wipe it on the two doorposts and the lintel, the structural support beam. Make sure that entrance to your house is completely smeared in the blood of this sacrificial lamb. Then, when God comes to inflict that last plague, God will see the houses of the Israelites. The blood on the doorway is *a sign* for God to Passover each house and for no harm to come to them.

Remember this event, says God. Keep this day as a feast day, to remember always that God saves, over and over again. God saves from oppression, and small mindedness, from shame and guilt. God saves from hurt and anger and resentment. God saves, calling us to be children of God so that we may forgive and begin anew in God's love.

Now there's lots about this saving story that doesn't add up. God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh is unbelieving, stubborn and obstinate. There's much pain and suffering before the release of freedom.

Then, there's some argument as to Moses' role; whether he finally ceases the authority and outsmarts Pharaoh; whether Egyptian authorities honor ancient law and release God's people with economic means for sustainability; and whether Pharaoh, so defeated and sorrowful at the trauma of the final plague, gives up or, better yet, is converted by God's saving grace.

Wailing and moaning, Pharaoh pushes the Israelites out the door, to be gone. His heart is softened; he's converted. Watching the Israelites make a dash for it, their dough yet to rise, tucked up under their arm, Pharaoh, begs for God's blessing to be a child of God, knowing all too well, that without God, we cannot venture forth.

This Passover feast is what God asks us to remember over and over again as a sign of God's saving grace for us; a sign of the holy, saving meal we now share from Jesus Christ, in this bread and this cup, where Jesus claims us as God's own, transforming us into children of God, nourishing us with forgiving, loving grace, to be active players in God's story.

There is much to say about our story of God's Salvation History. And, like the Israelites, called by God to go, I'm certain the same is true for me as well. This is not an easy parting. You are sealed in my heart forever and I love you dearly.

You forgive readily and shower grace all around. You love deeply and share with generous hearts and minds. Over and over again, you have taught me the gifts of servanthood, and faithfulness. You link up together, arm and arm, forming an indissoluble bond proving that when two or three are gathered, Jesus is in the midst and equipping you to be more than ever thought possible. You strive with courage and mightiness to be the church, to make a difference, to love and show mercy.

I'm forever grateful for how God called me to be a part of Christ Church to teach me what it means to love the Lord, be bold in our faith, to mark a path that forms loving community, and trust. Now, because of God's grace so generously poured upon me from you, I'm able to trust in God, obey and go.

Christ Church, don't ever forget who you are. God has claimed you as children of God. Now, claim your place in God's story. You are blessed beyond measure with God's saving grace; the promise of a transformed life.

As you sit on this soon to be busy intersection of Gayton and Pouncey Tract Road, serving in the most vibrant economic location of the greater Richmond area, writing more chapters in God's bigger story carries a valuable price, already paid by Jesus Christ in his story for us. But, because Jesus gave, we too, as the hands and feet of Jesus, are called to give. Be bold in your giving. Go, my good friends. Go, be a force in this neighborhood. Make a difference, here and beyond. Give. Give until it pinches and then give some more. Because, you know all too well, the more we give the more we will receive. Help others make a difference too. You've heard me say it before, Christ Church, you are a beacon of hope and opportunity for what is good, and kind, loving and forgiving. Be a part of God's saving story.

And, thank you for teaching me the generosity of God's faith as you serve in being children of God in the world. Thank you for showing me that living with God's saving grace means living boldly and courageously a life transformed, a life changed forever, a life where we cannot stand still but we must go, go out and do God's work in the world, in, with and through Jesus Christ. I love you Christ Church.

