

November 4, 2018



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The Message: 'Standing and Leaning'

"Comfort, O Comfort my people," says your God.

The stories we have heard during our stewardship campaign have been moving, honest, powerful. . Sometimes it is not easy to tell our stories, so we have been truly blessed that three of our members have been so willing to share with us, to model what it is like to share our stories.

They are stories of yearning for something,

- a yearning that comes out of the loneliness of feeling like a stranger in a new land,
- A yearning to return to the faith of childhood in the midst of grief at the loss of a spouse,
- A yearning to fill the emptiness caused by leaving one church and community and searching for another.

The writer of the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews gathered together many of the stories of faith

For those who come today to light a candle, you are blessed to be among a people who seek to share deeply their stories of grief and redemption, of darkness into which light has shined. Your story is important. It can inspire others to comfort you, and as you share the glimmers of light in your grief, you can give courage to others who are walking that journey.

All our stories are great stories. For they are the stories of the faith of this people, of Christ Church. Stories of faith are often dark, but they are also witnesses to the light. Grief isn't the end of these stories. It's the beginning. One who grieves enters into this community and finds hope, companionship, love and discovers that their story is not theirs alone. It strikes a chord in others who share similar stories. And together those stories all fit into one Story: the Christian Story.

Scripture is full of stories

Our windows tell dozens of stories -- from Creation to Resurrection

1. There are stories of Darkness:

- global stories of the end times and harsh judgment;
- national stories of a defeated people;
- the darkness of the times, of oppression and forced marches;
- the darkness of the life of a poor unwed teenager and a kindly carpenter called into a life path by the will of God.

2. There are Stories of Dreams

The story of Joseph, who had to deal with his own world coming to an end, shows us that sometimes, in our grief, we just need to fall asleep. A dream can be the way in which God shows up to make sense of our lives. (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13, 19-20, 22).

3. There are Stories of Remembering

We are approaching a season that has a way of triggering particularly painful memories of past happier times.

But remembering has a powerfully healing effect. After Mary's pregnancy, after Jesus' birth, the angels, the shepherds, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." She remembered; her heart was the place where her memories were made whole in the present.

4. There are Stories of God's Love for the Frail

The Christian story teaches us that God has a preferential love for what is fragile.

Blessed are

- *the poor in spirit,*
- *those who mourn,*
- *the meek,*
- *those who yearn for justice and mercy,*
- *those who are pure of heart,*
- *the peacemakers*
- *and those who are persecuted for the sake of justice.*

This means us. Advent will remind us that God came to us—and comes to us still—vulnerable as an infant. Christ is to be found among what is fragile—including us.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” we hear God cry out (in the text from Isaiah 40:1). If, in this life, we must grieve, let’s enter into grief with a heart open to this comfort, this solace. Let us look for the light in the darkness.

Christ takes on the vulnerability of our grief in his birth and on the cross, when he shows us the lengths he is willing to go in order to enter into and redeem our experience, the lengths he is willing to go to know us.

When we need to, we are able to lean on the story our faith, on the stories of the faith of others, on the stories of the faith of this church.

One of the words the writer to the Hebrews uses to describe faith means ‘standing under’ -- the origin of our term to understand. In Hebrews, we hear that standing under the stories of faith, or standing *in* the stories of faith gives us confidence right from the beginning. Hearing about the faith of others -- and continuing on to believe until the end -- even though your own story, my own story isn’t complete -- that is faith.

There are lots of stories mentioned -- more than we could read today. But perhaps the story of Abraham and Sarah is the quintessential one.

First, Abraham demonstrated his faith by leaving his home and going to the place God called him sight unseen. But this great obedience never really paid off during Abraham’s life. He never possessed that land of promise. Instead, he dwelt there as a foreigner, living in tents (Hebrews 11:9). Moreover, and even more powerfully unsatisfying is the fact that Abraham waited his whole life for the *real* dwelling place, the *real* inheritance, the city built by God himself, but never did attain it.

God promised a multitude of descendants to the elderly Sarah and Abraham. God fulfilled that promise, but Sarah and Abraham only lived to see their one son born.

What the storyteller is teaching us that our individual faith stories are only made whole when added to the stories of faith of the whole community.

‘Standing under’ or understanding the stories of our faith-- biblical, and our own personal stories -- they are partial until they are all added together.

Worshipping in the synagogue yesterday, hearing a new horrific story of the murder of Jewish worshippers moved me to tears. But, in the words and prayers of leaders of every faith, the ending of

that story was one of hope, of peace, of justice, of love. 11 stories are incomplete, but the stories of thousands of peaceful faithful folk complete their stories and allow God's light to shine.

These are times when we are called to stand up for our faith, to act boldly, and when we do, we know we are standing on the promises of God. Promises we have heard since we first encountered the Christian story.

And today, we have the blessing of affirming, reaffirming our faith in that story, committing ourselves to sharing our story of faith and discerning God's wisdom as we move into the future. There are new stories to be told, new stories of faith to make. The more stories of the faith of others we hear and participate in, the more complete our own individual stories will become. So here we are,

- leaning on God's everlasting love ,
- standing on the covenant God makes and remakes with God's people everywhere in all times.

Let's stand as able, and affirm or reaffirm our faith as we answer the questions asked at our baptism.