

I want to tell you a story this morning. Now, as I tell you this story,
you will recognize parts of the story.

You might begin to let your mind wander because you
recognize parts of the story. The grocery list, the list of things to do before
Monday comes, the worries about the health of a loved one
or the health of the nation may try to sneak in.

But I ask you to listen to this story today, because it is a story that still needs
telling. It is a story about a God who rescues people,
and like every good story, it is an eternal story.
Though it is the story of people saved by God long ago,
it is also a story about the God who saves us—still today.

The story goes like this.

Once upon a time there was a group of people, descendants father of Abraham,
who found themselves enslaved by Pharaoh in the land of Egypt.

How they got to Egypt is complicated, but I can tell you this:

it was because God took some very bad behavior by some of Jacob's sons,
toward Joseph, the youngest son and used it to bring Joseph, to Egypt.

Years pass, and much later it is because of Joseph
that the Egyptians are prepared to weather a national famine he is a hero.
And it is because of Joseph that the family of Jacob is reunited,
that forgiveness happens and reconciliation happens.

But then many, many more years pass,
and things start to fall apart for the Hebrew people.

Pharaoh, the big ruler of Egypt thinks the Hebrew people, Abrahams people,
are a threat. So he arranges things to make their life not just hard,
but deadly. Pharaoh has a lot of power, but it isn't enough—he wants
power over the life, and death of the Hebrew people.

This is intolerable to God. So once again, like he did with Joseph,
God steps in to rescue to Hebrew people,
who have been enslaved in Egypt by the great and greedy Pharaoh of Egypt.

You know much of this story, you know how God leads the Hebrews
out of the threat to their very lives,
into a new life, called the promised land
----a place where they are slaves no longer,
but a people who have been chosen by God to carry God's light
and the news of God's salvation and new beginnings to all of the world.
Then, for 40 years, the people are guided by God, and fed in the wilderness.

It takes a long time for them to learn the ways of God, whose ways are
so very, very different from the ways of Pharaoh.
They learn a new way to be in the world—not fearing Pharaoh,
but learning to trust God and each other.

It is hard, but they make it.

God gives them new rules to follow, rules that help them
learn to respect each other, care for each other,
and care even people outside their tribe, to love others as God loves them.
Rules that will help them not be Pharaoh.

Living this way, they learn,
is how God wants to be loved.
Honoring each other, they learn, is how they honor God.

It takes some 40 years of wandering around the desert
for them to learn how to live by God's rules
instead of Pharaoh's rules.

But eventually they are ready to be a tribe and to settle down,
and begin a new chapter in the new land.

Moses, who has walked beside them for 40 years is an old man,
about to die. And Moses has a parting word to say to the Hebrew people,
the Jews, before they cross over into the land they will settle.

Words of wisdom. Words of caution. Words of promise.

God's wisdom. God's caution. God's promise.

Here is the message, in a nutshell.

“You once lived in a place where Pharaoh had great greed and absolute power. Remember Pharaoh had so much power that he wanted all your baby boys to die, because he was afraid that you might steal his power?”

Remember when his grand pyramids were more important to him than your living to see another day?

Remember the beatings, the killings, the greed and the corruption?

Don’t think you couldn’t become Pharaoh.

Don’t think that you are immune from the seduction of greed and immense power just because you are my people.

And don’t think that my grace will continue to protect you if you do.

You will need to make some hard choices. Life and death choices.”

Choose life, says Moses. Choose life.

And the message, continues: *“I have given you a moral code—a way to live together that honors me and honors life. It is pretty simple.*

Love God by loving your neighbor as yourself.”

That simple guideline probably rings a bell.

Jesus preaches the same message: love God by loving our neighbor.

Jesus has come to remind us---again,
that we always have the choice—as individuals, and as a community;
we can choose death by choosing greed and absolute power.

Or we can, as individuals, and as a community, choose life
by choosing to learn love of neighbor.

Something that is relevant to the church today

is that we live in a society that has become confused about
what is life giving, and what invites death. Greed and the pursuit of power
reigns in the halls of congress, on Wall Street and in the White House.
And truth be told, we may have to live with that for a while.

In the meantime, we are still called to be the church.
We are still called to practice, and to and God's way,
and critique the abuse of power,
as Jesus did, the way of Pharaoh,
or in his day, the way of Caesar and the religious elite in Judaism.

Jesus still calls us to make the choice: greed and the pursuit of absolute power,
or loving God by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

This is a time when the world very much needs the good news spoken by Jesus.
This is a time when the world very much needs the Church
to show that there is a different way to be in the world
than what the Pharaohs of the world offer.

The challenges and choices we face are not just about choosing life
over death for our own community, but choices that will be life giving, or
death dealing for the whole world.

As always, God calls us to think beyond our own welfare.

As always we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But now, our neighbor is the rest of the world, and even the earth itself.

Jesus said that he has come to give us life, and life in abundance.

God has spoken this message to everyone from the slaves in Egypt to the
people living under Roman Empire oppression to the Church of today.

Like the former Hebrew slaves entering the promised land for the
very first time, churches have choices to make.

Choices about how to be a life-giving presence in today's world.

The Church has work to do. We need to, once again
become the holy community that exists for the purpose of learning to love
each other, and learning to love our neighbors in holy, effective ways.

How we once did that, 50 or 100 years ago,
that isn't what the world needs from us now. How we did Church 50 or 100
years ago doesn't meet the needs of today.

Our lives and schedules are different. The world is more complicated.

Which means our parish has work to do if we are to choose life over death.

We need to again discover, again,
how to be that holy community that God calls us to be
if we are to have life.

The work of the Renewal Team is meant to help us to discover how we,
the Church of the Advent, in the year 2017 might be called to and church
suitable to today's world. Over time, there will be some changes,
though we don't yet know what they will be.

Some changes will be painful.

Sometimes it may feel like we are cutting off our hand
or plucking out our eyes.

But if our 100 year old eyes prevent us from becoming
who God calls us to be at this time and in place,
then we mourn what is lost and celebrate the hope of new life.

I want to close today by asking 2 things of you. The first is this: please pray for
our renewal team, their work and the work of God amongst them. Please pray for
them, daily, as both a team and as individuals.

Your frequent attention, through prayer, to the new life God wants to
grow in this place is needed.

The second thing is this: Taize song.

Justice that is retribution, but restoration > gives peace + joy in the Holy Spirit.