

This is the night!

The night we recall some of our most beloved stories from Scripture. Stories about creation, and the flood and the Red Sea and more. We love these stories. But they aren't just dramatic tales from the past; they each are just a piece of *The Story* that we really celebrate tonight. The story of God's relentless effort to love us, and give us life.

From the beginning, that is all God has wanted for us: Abundant, full, beautiful life. That's why God made a way to deliver the Israelites from slavery. Because slavery is not full life. And God cleansed the Earth with a flood, because it was toxic and needed a good washing. And God sent Jesus, because God couldn't stand to stay far away, but needed to come near, and show us how to love. How to save lives.

Wherever Jesus found that abundant life was being threatened, he went there. He healed the sick; restoring them to life and community. He fed the hungry; sustaining their life and. He spoke with the rejected ones and the outcasts; telling them that their lives matter, and showing those in power that their lives are no greater than others'.

Jesus' whole life is about showing us God's vision of abundant life for *all*. And it is a mission he was willing to die for.

See, Jesus didn't die because God needed some blood sacrifice. He died because that message of love for *all* people is too hard for the world to hear. It is a threat to all the systems that humans have created. Systems of power and privilege; systems of wealth and poverty; systems of winners and losers. Jesus died a loser, in solidarity with those who are losers in these humans systems. But he rose triumphant, because those systems will never get the last word.

Yes, sometimes the story of God's stubborn love is hard for us to take. It can be hard for us to believe that we could be worthy of such love. And it can be *really* frustrating to think that that same love is available to everyone else, especially certain people who really don't deserve it.

But see...that's the point. God doesn't care about "deserving."

My 8th grade confirmation students – who are about to affirm their baptisms tonight – have this running joke about "Jesus points." So for example, if they give a really good answer about the catechism or something, I might say, "Great job, Lindsey! You've earned 20 Jesus points!" And if you've misbehaved in class, or you don't know an answer, well...there go some of your Jesus points.

It's a joke because, of course, there are no Jesus points. God doesn't keep score. God doesn't punish you for your sins or keep track of your wrong-doings. God doesn't give extra love and grace to those who perform well.

Nope. Those are human ways. We're *obsessed* with those ways; with fairness and winning and earning. That's *our* story.

But God doesn't give up on showing us another way of living and treating one another. God promises that this vision of abundant life is possible. After all, we were created in God's image. And God's loving, life-giving nature is baked right into us.

So we don't have to give in to human ways. We can renounce those systems – we can even shake our fist at them like we will here in a few minutes. We can turn from all that junk and live a new life. And we can make it possible for others, too.

Easter reminds us that new life really does happen. There are signs of it all over the place. I think this is why we love to see babies, and why spring gives us such hope and joy. Because wherever new life grows, we catch a glimpse of God.

I saw a version of God's vision right here, last night. We gathered in this darkened space, around a large wooden cross. And after hearing the story of Jesus' crucifixion, people came forward to light candles and pray around the cross. We knelt. We sang. Some of us cried.

I don't know what each person was carrying with them to that cross. But I know one thing: What I saw was a glimpse of the kingdom of God. What I saw was the cross drawing all people together, all equally in need of the love and forgiveness and healing that Jesus offers. I saw rich people and poor people. I saw able-bodied and sick people. I saw babies and children and young adults and our oldest people. I saw sinners and I saw saints. And we were all at the same level before that cross.

This is the night, dear friends, that we remember God's story and take our place in it. Because in baptism, the very breath of God – the Holy Spirit – is given to us. The same breath that first gave life to the earth is put into us so that we can help bring about the abundant life that God intends for the world. Fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, we become co-workers with Jesus in God's story.

In a moment, Xia and Rachel will enter the waters of baptism. And I imagine there is at least a little anxiety about getting into that tub in front of all these people, and going under the water. About taking their place in the story.

And later our WAY candidates and confirmation students will renew their baptismal vows, saying "yes" to the promises of baptism: to attend worship and be a part of the Church; to hear scripture and receive communion regularly; to share the good news about

Jesus; to serve others above themselves; to work for justice and peace in all the world. These are big promises. And they too, along with all of us, might have a moment of fear, a moment of doubt; as we say, “I do.”

Because we know we won’t. We know we will fail at all of these things sometimes. We will doubt. We will cause harm; we will run away from God; we will break all of the commandments in one way or another.

But remember, this is God’s story. The story of God’s promise to *us*. And God has always made a way – through the flood, across the Red Sea, out of the grave, in the future.

So we say, “I do...*and*...I ask God to help and guide me.” And God will.

In faith, we turn to Christ, and we turn back out into the world, to take our place in God’s story.

Amen.