

Holy Saturday April 11, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Stories in the Dark John 19:38-42
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

My parents were very good at reading stories to me, and they were intentional about reading me good stories. When I was two years old, they read C.S. Lewis' classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book in the seven *Chronicles of Narnia* to me. It is one of my earliest memories. I can vaguely remember looking at a page in the book with Pauline Baynes' black and white illustration of Lucy and Mr. Tumnus strolling together arm in arm under his umbrella to protect them from the falling snow, but I cannot make out the words on the page, being too young to read.

To this day C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* are very important stories to me. I read all seven books often, especially when I experience a sudden change, or when it feels like the world is shifting under my feet, when I feel uncertain about events and how they will impact the future. *The Chronicles of Narnia* help ground me in my faith in God and help me trust I can get through uncertain times, just like the characters in the stories.

C. S. Lewis' books also helped me learn how to draw a deeper connection to the stories in the Bible, my life, and the events going on in the world. That skill has been a gift providing me with comfort and courage during times in my life when I felt afraid or uncertain or when things were changing quickly. Far from teaching me to escape from the challenges and tests of life, C. S. Lewis and my parents taught me there are times when the best thing a person can do is go back to the stories that have helped form them into who they are and what they believe as a way of figuring out how to move forward.

To this day, when I experience deep challenges, when I don't know what to make of events, I go back to those essential stories in the Bible or and other stories like the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Because there is hope, healing and power in sacred stories.

The power of sacred stories might help us observe this Holy Saturday in Holy Week. Normally, the Church observes the day before Easter Sunday with one of the oldest and most important liturgies in the Church: The Great Vigil of Easter. During this service, which begins in the evening, we light what is called the first fire (usually as the sun is setting), because the Christ Candle was extinguished at the end of the Maundy Thursday service and no candles are lit during Good Friday. From that first fire we light the Paschal Candle, from which everyone at the service lights a small hand held candle and we process into a dark church where the deacon, priest or in the case of Church of the Good Shepherd one or two choral scholars chant the ancient prayer called the Exultet. It's a beautiful song celebrating God's saving acts. After the Exultet, we sit in

the dark with our candles aglow, sing hymns and listen to the familiar stories of the Bible: the first story when God created heaven and earth, the fall of Adam and Eve, the great flood, the plagues and Moses leading the People of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry land, the prophecy of the dry bones and God's promise of eternal salvation. After we renew our Baptismal Vows, the lights are turned on as we ring bells as we proclaim Christ is Risen and celebrate Holy Communion. It's a service that ends in joy and begins with stories in the dark.

However, this year because of the stay at home mandates and directives from the Bishop, we will not gather together to share a light in the darkness. We are not permitted to light the Paschal candle during on-line services nor are we permitted to sing or pray the Exultet. The directive also forbids celebrating Holy Eucharist on-line.

Which leaves this year's Holy Saturday looking more like the service in the Book of Common Prayer on page 283. It's a short service, it only takes up one page in our prayer book. It is a service that observes Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We know little about these men, especially Joseph of Arimathea, except that they took responsibility for burying Jesus, to do the very last act of kindness that could be done for him.

Holy Saturday is the day after the tomb has been sealed. When all that could be done in the rush before the sabbath was done. It is a day like a sigh, a breath that goes nowhere. I've heard many people compare the self-isolation we are all asked to do to flatten the covid-19 pandemic to Jesus being in the tomb. But I don't believe that is where we are in the story. I don't believe we are in the tomb with Jesus. I believe we are left outside the tomb experiencing the confusion, the ever changing information that can feel like chaos, the not knowing what is going on or how long the stay at home mandate will last, what impact it will have on our world, our community, our economy, our church. Some of us may be feeling heartsick, a few could be grieving losses. And none of us really knows what to do.

That's where Jesus' followers were on Holy Saturday. They were isolated both from fear of being arrested for being associated with Jesus and because it was their sabbath, their day of rest, a day to refrain from activity.

None of the gospels describe how the disciples spent that day. But if we look back at that ancient liturgy, The Great Vigil of Easter, a liturgy created by some of the earliest of Christians, perhaps we might get an idea. Maybe they spent it telling stories. When we take away the lighting of the Paschal Candle, the Exultet, and Holy Eucharist from that liturgy, what we have left is the stories of God's salvation. Perhaps that speaks to their importance. We have to remember when the events we commemorate every Holy Week actually happened, no one knew what was going to happen next. It was confusing and traumatic for Jesus' disciples, for whom it must

certainly have felt like their whole world was suddenly turned upside down, like the ground had shifted under their feet. Perhaps as they rested after Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and burial, they told each other those important, sacred stories. Maybe those sacred stories helped them feel connected to God when Jesus had been taken from them.

Perhaps the lesson for us this year on Holy Saturday is an important one during this time of pandemic. Holy Saturday reminds us while we need to listen to authorities, we can find both comfort and courage by seeking God who is present even in this time. "If we want God's love, hope, thoughts," writes scholar and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright, "then we have to go through a time of silence, resting, ignorance and dispossession. If we want to find God's way forward, we must learn to wait, to be quiet and to affirm God's order in our chaos but not yet understand it."

Holy Saturday reminds us there have been times when Christians did not know what tomorrow was going to bring; when they were uncertain, afraid, traumatized. During such times, what helped get them through was to do what could be done, and when that was completed, rest, listen for God, and wait.

There is a lot of pressure to push forward with all kinds of solutions to the problems the covid-19 pandemic has brought with it; to become a production company producing church services from our living rooms. But we don't have to rush forward. We can take our time to rest from all the changes, to wait, to listen to the stories of God's salvation, to consider how God wants us to respond.

Perhaps we can give ourselves this day to rest, to read or watch or listen to a story or two that we are familiar with that grounds us in our faith and identity, that helps us connect with God, and shows us the light of faith is still flickering in the dark.