

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
RALLY DAY  
September 8, 2002

**“When Your Children Ask You”**  
**Exodus 12 (selected verses); 1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

What would you think of me if I told you this about me:

Whenever I behold purple diamonds and green polka-dots,  
it is a deeply emotional experience for me;  
In fact, am often moved to tears at the mere sight  
of purple diamonds and green polka-dots.

What’s more, every morning I have a ritual that I follow:

I open my garage door.  
And from my garage I take a large cylinder shaped like a trash can,  
painted white with purple diamonds and green polka-dots stenciled on it.  
I roll this cylinder up the hill in my front yard to the highest point  
turn it up on its end,  
sit cross-legged, with my back to this cylinder, and sing a song.

What would you think of me if I told you this?

Perhaps that the ministry has finally gotten to me –  
I’ve worked myself into mental illness.  
Or that I’ve managed to hide my true identity as a member of a strange cult.  
Or that, perhaps, I have experience some things in my past that you don’t know about,  
that there is apparently a great deal about me that you don’t know.

Well, before you have me committed to an institution,

let me be honest – I don’t do any of these things.  
I have no special attachment to purple diamonds, green polka-dots, or cylinder rituals.  
But let’s change the scenario a little.

What if I told you this about me:

I am known, from time to time, to go to large gatherings of people  
where the people in the center of these gatherings all wear matching clothes.  
And they cover one of their hands with a leathery material,  
and throw a white object at each other.

Every now and then, one of these people will swing a stick at the object  
and then run around in circles  
while all the people gathered around jump up and down and scream.

But always, before we begin this ritual,

everyone in the circle stands up, turns toward a piece of rectangular cloth.  
The piece of cloth is made up of red and white stripes,

with one corner being blue, with 50 white stars.  
The people stand with their hands over their hearts,  
some feeling pride, some reverence, some with tears in their eyes,  
some with deep, and emotional memories, some angry,  
some defiant toward anyone who doesn't feel the same way they do  
about these stars and stripes.

What would you think of me if I told you this?  
I suspect you would completely understand  
and you would be able to interpret to me – with a great deal of accuracy –  
why I was doing the things I was doing.  
It would not seem the least bit unusual,  
because you understand – for the most part – how the game of baseball is played;  
and you know the events of history that have produced the American flag.

To someone from another planet, or from some remote, isolated corner of our planet,  
becoming emotional about men hitting a white ball  
or weeping at the sight of red stripes and white stars,  
would be just as absurd as rolling a cylinder up the hill  
or weeping at the sight of purple diamonds and green polka-dots.

It would seem absurd for one simple reason – they don't know the stories you know.  
Stories that make all those actions make sense –  
Stories that make all those actions hold a great deal of power  
in the lives of a great many people.  
The stories we know, and the stories we believe,  
make all the difference.

\* \* \* \* \*

On our church staff retreat –  
which we held this year just for the purpose of having fun together –  
we got to playing a little game called Logics, or Riddles.  
You may have played something like it,  
in which someone gives you a clue and you try to figure out the solution  
by asking “yes” or “no” questions.

For instance:  
There is a man lying face down, with glass around his face.  
He is dead. How did he die?  
Then, beginning with that clue, and by asking sequence of “yes” or “no” questions,  
the players, if they are successful, eventually find out  
that the man is an astronaut, who has fallen on his face on the moon,  
and broken his face mask, and died for lack of air.

So (regardless of the fact that some of our staff debated whether this could actually happen)  
the only way to understand the meaning of the scene

is to know the story which led up to that point in time.

\* \* \* \* \*

So the people of Israel in the Bible, on the tenth day of the first month, every year  
take a lamb for each family,  
a lamb without blemish for each household,  
and they slaughter the lamb, and divide it in proportion to the number who eat it.  
They take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel  
of the houses in which they eat it.  
And they roast it before they eat it, and burn any that is left over before morning.

Furthermore, for seven days they eat unleavened bread,  
removing all the leaven from their houses,  
and they do not work for those seven days.  
And anyone who dares to defy this ritual is cut off from the community.

And after describing this ritual, the Lord God of Israel says to Moses and Aaron,  
*When you come to the land that the Lord will give you,  
as he has promised,  
you shall keep this observance.  
And when your children ask you,  
“What do you mean by this observance?”  
you shall say,  
“It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord,  
for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt,  
when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.”*

When your children ask you, “What do you mean by this?”  
You shall tell them a story,  
a story that that will shape their life  
a story that will change not only the way the understand *this ritual*,  
but that will change the way they understand *themselves*  
they way they understand *the world around them*  
and *their place in it*,  
the way they understand *the God who saves them*.

\* \* \* \* \*

And so – in the same way – we who participate the practices of the church  
are the recipients of a story.  
Our story has been told in many ways, by many writers in our sacred scripture.  
The Apostle Paul summarizes a portion of our story when he talks about  
one of the church’s rituals:  
*...I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,  
that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed*

*took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks,  
he broke it, and said, "This is my body that is for you..."*  
*...In the same way he took the cup also, after supper,  
saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood.  
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*  
*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

It is only by knowing the story of Jesus, his holy life of ministry,  
his unjust suffering, his brutal death, and the mystery of his empty tomb,  
that we can make any sense of this ritual of bread and cup.  
But how will we know the story? Who will tell us?  
Perhaps of even greater importance is this:  
Who will tell our children?  
When our children ask us, "What does this mean?"  
will we be able to tell them.  
Do we know the story well enough?

\* \* \* \* \*

There is a village in southwest Ireland named Dunquin.  
In the village is a deep well that is considered to be holy.  
Close to this well there stands a huge pile of stones,  
stones that were obviously piled up there by human hands, over many years.  
Recently, a man of this village who had lived most of his life near that well,  
was asked how the pile of stones come to be there.  
He said, since ancient days, the local people every March  
trekked to the spot and each threw one or more stones onto the pile.  
Though he participated in it every year  
he had no idea what this practice meant – or why it continued.

Such a story makes me wonder, at what point in the long history of that ritual  
did the ritual finally lose its meaning completely.  
It was no doubt a gradual process  
by which the meaning and power of the action faded bit by bit  
until the day finally came when no one remembered the story  
that evoked the ritual in the first place.

\* \* \* \* \*

I wonder if just the same process may happen, in a somewhat swifter fashion,  
in our own lives of faith, and in our life as a community of faith.  
Gradually, over time, our faithful worship, our intentionally Christian fellowship,  
our programs and activities,  
become detached from the story that brought them into being.  
We lose sight of the reason the church is in existence,

or we lose sight of the purpose that gives our individual lives meaning,  
because we forget the story that defines who we are  
as children of God.

And if we forget, then who will tell our children  
when our children ask us?

\* \* \* \* \*

I make this point today, on Rally Day, because I want to emphasize  
that this celebration of the beginning of our church school year  
is not just silly pomp and circumstance.

It is a matter of life and death;

a matter of the continuance of faith, or the loss of faith.

It is a matter of meaning or meaninglessness, purpose or purposelessness,  
the knowledge of God or the ignorance of God,

salvation in God, or separation from God,

the endurance of a faith community in American culture,

or the disappearance of the American church in any recognizable form.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having painted the picture in such a dire manner,

I have to say that I believe Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
can approach this task of telling our faith story with confidence.

I look forward eagerly to the beginning of the new church year

and I believe have some very good days of spiritual growth  
and faith nurture ahead of us.

The Classroom Rotation Model that we are beginning for our children

derives its strength from the way it emphasizes the telling  
and retelling ...and retelling...and retelling again...

the biblical story, in a variety of interesting ways.

Your Christian Education leaders have been working very hard

to find ways to keep telling the story of God's love for the world  
so that when our children ask "What does all this mean?"

we have an answer.

I also cannot miss this opportunity to say that our adult classes

the Library Bible Class,

the Coffee and Conversation Class in the parlor,

and the Upper Room Class for young and "recently-young" adults

are vital in helping this community understand

the meaning of what we do on Sunday morning, and throughout the week.

And one more area of our life together needs mentioning.

Just across the driveway back here,

children and parents of those children pass through our doors

5 days a week.

Not all of these children, and not all of their parents, are church people.

That is, they do not all know the story about the love of God's Son  
that we know.

But their children are experiencing that story,

in the love and care they receive from Christian care-givers

who pray with them, sing with them, and are willing to talk about Jesus with them.

I wonder whether we, as a congregation,

are really making the most out of that contact.

Or do we have an untapped opportunity to reach out to people  
and tell them our story.

In closing, my question for each of you is this:

When your children ask you,

or your grandchildren, or the children of this church,

or your neighbor, or your co-worker, asks you

“What is the meaning of your church participation?”

Do you know what to tell them? Do you know the story?

Or do you need to take some steps – perhaps a few steps into a church school class –  
to let your church help you remember the story  
that makes the world make sense.