

**The Great Easter Vigil & Baptism of Ava Alexander – Rev. Sarah D. Odderstol
Genesis 1.1-2.2 – Exodus 14.10-15.1 – Romans 6.3-11 – Luke 24.2-12**

What do families do when they gather? They tell stories. They tell the same stories over and over. My grandmother couldn't get three words out of her mouth before we all knew exactly which story she was beginning to tell.

Stories shape our identity. Stories teach us lessons. We draw strength from stories. Stories are very powerful.

This is the night we have come together to celebrate resurrection and rebirth. Tonight we are gathered as a family. We have gathered to hear our stories. We tell the same stories every year. They are stories that shape our identity as Christians. We learn lessons and draw strength from these stories.

From the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis, we learn that God is a creative genius. God created everything. God made humankind in God's own image. God saw all that God had made and indeed, creation was very good. We are a part of God's creation. At our very core, we are God's. At our very core, we are good.

From the story of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea, we learn that we do not need to be afraid...even when the situation seems beyond hope. We learn that God calls us into newness and that we will be tempted to return to old, destructive behaviors. God will deliver God's people. Moses tells the people, "God will fight for you; you have only to keep still."

From Paul's letter to the Church in Rome we learn that when we are baptized, we are united to Christ in his resurrection and his death. In that death we die to the power of sin. Our sin cannot keep us from relationship with God. If we are in Christ, meaning we believe in Christ and strive to follow Jesus' teachings, then we are dead to sin and alive to God.

From Luke's story of the resurrection, we learn that God has power beyond our imagining. Suffering, humiliation and death cannot hold down that which God chooses to raise up.

Stories are very powerful. As a Christian family, we have to be very careful how we wield that power. Stories from the Bible have been used to rationalize waging war. Stories from the Bible have been used to justify slavery. Stories from the Bible have been used to keep couples in terrible marriages. Stories from the Bible are still being used to deny people full participation in the life of the church.

We can heed the same advice in our personal lives. From my Grandmother's stories of being a farm wife during the Great Depression, I learned that we are adaptive, resourceful people. We are strong. We can survive anything. However, from other stories I could have very easily gotten the message that a young woman should not

invest much emotional energy in loving men. My Grandmother's father died when she was eight, her husband died when she was forty and her only son was killed in Viet Nam. As far as my grandmother was concerned, loving men only brought pain. What stories give you identity? Do they build you up or do they bring you down? You can choose the stories that shape your life.

Together we baptized Ava Marie Alexander into God's family of faith. We celebrate her new birth through the waters of baptism as our newest Christian. Our stories are now her stories. Her parents and Godparents promised that they would bring Ava up to know the stories of her faith. And we promised to do all in our power to support Ava, her parents and Godparents in that endeavor. As Ava grows she will be shaped and formed by stories: Christian family stories, Brewer family stories, Alexander family stories (Ava, make sure you fact check those Alexander stories with your Great Grandma Lois) and Ava will have her own stories. Ava will grow to have wisdom and courage because of stories.

This is the night we gather as a Christian family to claim and reclaim the blessing of our stories. We rejoice with the heavenly hosts for the victory of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ, over death. By our baptism this is a victory that we can claim for ourselves. This is our story.

*I love to tell the story Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, Of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, Because I know it's true;
It satisfies my longings As noting else would do.
I love to tell the story; Twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story Of Jesus and His love.*