I would like to tell you I acted out of deep faith
Or that God sent me a dream to prophecy this helpless baby
Would grow up to deliver us all out of Egypt.
But I can’t.
Year after year Shifrah and I struggled to help mothers
push newborns out of their bodies and into the world.
Hour after hour we used the secret knowledge of our sacred calling,
Gentle words of encouragement, our own powerful hands.
Oh the joy and triumph when a wet head
Finally crosses over, the transport in every mother’s eyes,
Pain behind her now.
Besides, Jochebed was my neighbor: could I kill her son?

Hebrew cries were camel grunts to Pharaoh’s ears
So when we told him our women delivered their babies
before we midwives could arrive – that Hebrew women, unlike Egyptian women,
poured babies from their bodies like wine from a jug –
that stubborn, distrustful, arrogant man
naturally believed us.
I hope that our conversation this morning will pick up where the table conversations yesterday left off. The table conversations were generated from our reading yesterday from the book of Exodus. This is the story of the birth of Moses and the role of several women, midwives – and a girl, his sister, Miriam - who kept him alive. He would grow into his heroic identity of the one who would lead his tribe out of slavery. The scene gives birth, years before, to the journey the Israelites would take in becoming a nation. Identity emerging out of formed character, values, courage and grit. They are all present in this story. They develop over time.

**To be mindful of your table conversations yesterday, take a moment and reflect on what was most powerful for you in the conversation.**

You may have noticed that Miriam’s story is a story that functions on several levels. This is a story about **hope** when hope seems pointless. The rabbis say of Miriam, that because of the edict to kill baby boys, Hebrew couples stopped having sex at all. So, Miriam first had to encourage her parents’ intimacy so that Moses could be conceived. And when Moses’ mother places him in the Nile it is so that she does not have to watch him die. That is what parents did in those days. But his sister … she watches to see what will befall him. She is one bold little girl and a guardian of hope for her people.

This is a story about **courageous defiance** against the unjust use of power. It is a fist uplifted in the face of exploitation. The image of women giving birth (and who apparently do it so well and swiftly) helped by the very women who are meant to kill the newly born boys elegantly mocks the Pharaoh’s exploitative ways.

This is story about how **God creeps into the consciousness** even between enemies and brings new life. There is a calculated, albeit slow-moving plot. Some of the characters seem to know they are part of an unfolding story, and some do not. God is using the knowing and the unknowing to work the great plan of salvation.
This is a story about both relational and transactional forms of power. There is no more unifying example than Miriam’s question to the Pharaoh’s daughter: “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” A transaction so the baby may be fed, alongside the telling image of the nurturing power of relationship of a baby at its mother’s breast.

This is a story of trusting that God’s desire for God’s people is freedom.

This is a story of discovering one’s identity in the calling of God.

This is a story of those who appear to have no power, but oh, how they do.

Who are we, really, and how are we evolving – or devolving – to become it? How are we colluding with the Holy Spirit, our enemies, our sisters, our brothers, our parents – one another – to live who we are more faithfully?

This topic of Identity is a hard one to pin down. Identity manifests itself over time but holds its essence. There is a constancy in our lives we see in hindsight. Threads and strands we tug on through generations. They help us know why we think or act in certain ways. Some are noble, others we would rather put away never to be seen again.

The word, “Identity”, prompts us to introspection and an examination of how we spend our time, our resources. What drives us exactly? “Identity” frustrates us. We don’t always know when or if it is even happening. What does the process of forming one’s identity even look like? It was difficult for Elrond to find an image for the logo for this convention; ‘What do you mean by that?’ was an exasperated question as we approached this weekend. We tossed around ideas, taking more time than usual. It is difficult to capture an essence. And yet you know it when you see it. I think Elrond got it right. I love the thumbprint. Everybody has one – it is just that no two are alike. What a miracle that is! What a witness our fingerprints are to the indomitable creativity of God. Just when you think you have God figured out, institutionalized, pigeon-holed in some way or another, a new set of fingerprints is born. It is within the unified image of God and the greater story of our salvation that all of these unique fingerprints find expression of identity.
When congregations are in a search process for a new rector, priest-in-charge or vicar, I will review the profile created by the search committee, listening for the identity of the congregation in the words of the story they tell of themselves. I sometimes send the profile back and ask, “I cannot hear who you are here. I can hear what you do, but, who are you?” I get polite irritation in return.

Articulating who you are is more challenging than articulating what you do. I do not let you off the hook. And when a congregation says, “we don’t know....” I say, “then write that in the profile, and say, ‘we want to explore more deeply who we are.’” If indeed, you do. In the meantime think about why that might make a difference to the sort of future you could have.

To say we know we are called to something, but we don’t know what, is to name a starting place. It is to conceive of hope that God wants more for us than unknowing and an uncertain identity. Just like the story of the Exodus, it begins with conception; hope – in God knows what! But, a conscious desire to understand the calling on the life of the body.

As in all the stories of the Bible, uncertainty is part of the journey. Will we live or die? Will there be healthy offspring from our efforts? Are we sustainable? Can we keep the lights on? Can we pay our priest? As the Hebrews asked questions in Egypt, so we ask them now as the church seems to be dying. Yet even as the murder of baby boys was the terrorist act of the day in Egypt, new life was rising. God was at work. There was a journey of life ahead, because this is the way God has made the world to work. We see it in creation everyday.

Such is faith: the discipline of believing in what you cannot see. Assuming a posture of humbly being unsure, yet acting anyway. It is the single step that you trust will have incredible consequences in the years to come; results that in the moment you cannot even know how to imagine or ask for. Faith is to stand on frontier’s edge, conscious of who God is, and, taking a step at a time ever more deeply into the grand scheme of salvation. The process gives us the centerpiece of our Identity as the people of God. Rabbis also say that the promised land is not a place... it is what you discover on the journey there.
Faith is the centerpiece of our identity. It is the operating system, if you will, of being Christian. It is what it takes to follow Jesus, to trust grace, to work for justice, even when we think we are disempowered. It is to be willing to be a fool for Christ, to hope when there seems no reason to hope, to serve a vision far greater than we can see or imagine.

This is true of living a fruitful life even if you are not a Christian. An orientation, a discipline, of faith matters to living in a way that helps us discover ourselves and do extraordinary things. If we are Christian, we seek to be and do in the name of Christ for the glory of God. We are not our purpose. Salvation, the love and grace of God known in the world ... that is what we are shaped for. As William Temple said, “The Church is the only organization that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.”

*Table conversation: tell a story briefly when having faith shaped you into who you are.*

If faith is the centerpiece of our identity, reconciliation is the centerpiece of our activity. Our activity is always motivated by our identity. These two facets of identity and activity shape our vision, our mission, our plans.

It is the church’s mission to seek and serve reconciliation in the world, with God and with one another. Just naming that is a bold act of faith. In all things, it should be what we do. Reconciliation is illusive. It is a promised land. You find it on the way, it is never some place you arrive. We hold it out as our hope and our dream, and it will always challenge us and demand our best efforts. Do not all of us have numerous areas of brokenness in our lives? Relationships, aspects of ourselves, unjust systems in our society and culture? It is part of our human truth. It is fraught! And laughable that God has trusted us with such a mission, such a heart of purpose and activity! I imagine the persons of the Trinity saying to one another, “well that will keep them busy for a while!”

The generativity between identity and reconciliation, produces spiritual maturity; our deeper sense of knowing who we are. The process evolves our capacity to have the mind of Christ.
“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us ...” 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

You are crazy, God..... we will fail, to be sure. And fail we do. And we also succeed.

God has so much more faith in us than we do in God. And whether we think we can do it or not, like Miriam and her Hebrew and Egyptian sisters, their human spirit commingled with the Spirit of God, wells up in us, aligning our lives with God’s call. However could we help but hope and seek God’s future?

*Table Conversation: ponder some of your congregational successes and failures in the activity of reconciliation. There is power in naming.*

I think as we discover how God is calling the church to rise, even as it dies, one of our faithful acts is to build structures of reconciliation that are accessible for people today. The word has Latin roots, reflecting, “to bring together again.” Dictionaries add, “to make friendly again.” I like that image. The church already does some of this work quite well. Gathering for worship is part of our structure that encourages reconciliation. Serving our communities, sharing one another’s burdens; loving one another – both enemy and stranger, these are ways we the church come together, or, midwife the process alongside others. In many ways we reach out to those who may have no one at all reaching towards them. We feed, we clothe, we listen, we share, we welcome, we challenge, we change unjust structures, we speak, we march, we sit quietly in prayer. We embody God’s desire to be with humanity.

In our Anglican tradition, we love our worship most. Let’s accept that truth. It feels processional, holy in its form and structure. It takes the chaos of brokenness and makes it beautiful. All of the elements within worship are designed for reconciliation. I think sometimes we forget that and focus more on their performative exercise.
Liturgy must be perfect! No, liturgy must be reconciling! It must offer reconciliation at every turn, as we realign our will with that of Christ. It must offer reconciliation as we gather, hear the word, pray for the world, confess our sins, share the peace. And the pinnacle -- Eucharist -- the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, the event that itself reconciles and redeems the smallest brokenness as well as the great cosmic rifts that seem utterly irredeemable. Who else gathers weekly with such a magnificent identity and activity?

This year we want to continue to add to our repertoire of practices that will help us deepen our identity of faith and our activity of reconciliation. We seek in this diocese to live with greater boldness and grit. I love that word … grit.

So there are two practices of faith development and reconciliation that we will add to our growing repertoire of tools for the Christian life. I will describe them, but a third that is still forming, will be that our diocesan leaders will engage some training with Visions, Inc., on racial reconciliation. You will hear more about that as plans unfold.

Our Emergency Mediation Team – also known as the EMTs – is a group of professional mediators who are also members of our diocese. They work with our congregations who want to improve their communication skills, or, who are in deep conflict, where they need to become ‘friendly again.’ In the first quarter of 2018, our EMTs will offer training at the deanery level that will provide broad support for general communication skills, mediation of difficult subjects or challenges, or the occasional knock-down, drag-out fight. And yes, nice church people have those from time to time!

At the spring conference in May, we are going to have a session on storytelling. In my course this summer in Monterey, we heard from the Story Center in Oakland about the empowering work they do with victims of violence, post-war, in helping them tell their stories of not only trauma, but also salvation. One could make an argument that we have never resolved our Civil War trauma, for example, and, hence, our racial brokenness in this country continues to rage.
There are more areas of brokenness in our world than we could possibly name here. But part of why they rage is that we do not do the reconciliation work that is required for healing. So the brokenness just goes on and on. We all have stories to tell. But more so, we have stories to hear. As a practice of reconciliation that we could become quite good at (it costs nothing but your listening presence, your ability to be alongside, and some compassion), what difference would it make for someone who has never been heard, to be heard?

One of my course instructors who works for the Conciliation Advisory Council of the World Bank had a great response when I asked, “in the midst of all the chaos that you see as part of your work, what gets you out of bed every day to go at it again?” She responded, “Before I came to the World Bank, I worked as a mediator. I had a mediation between a bank and a woman in Nigeria who lost her home after her husband died. The bank took the home because it was in her husband’s name and she did not have the paperwork. When the mediation ended, she did not get her home back. I said I was sorry that she was losing her home. She said, “thank you. But I do feel justice having been heard.” And in its own way that bit of justice was reconciliation also.

How many stories in our neighborhoods need to be heard? How many stories in our pews? From the person now sitting next to you? Hearing them might inspire faith and bring reconciliation. This is the Christian life to which we are bid.

I, Miriam, stand at the sea and turn to face the desert stretching endless and still.
My eyes are dazzled, the sky brilliant blue, sunburnt sands unyielding white.
My hands turn to dove wings. My arms reach for the sky and I want to sing
The song rising inside me. My mouth open I stop.
Where are the words? Where the melody? In the moment of panic my eyes go blind.
Can I take a step without knowing a destination? Will I falter, Will I fall, Will the ground sink away from me? The song still unformed – how can I sing?
To take the first step – to sing a new song –
Is to close one’s eyes and dive into unknown waters.
For a moment knowing nothing risking all – but then to discover the waters are friendly
The ground is firm.
And the song – the song rises again. Out of my mouth come words lifting the wind.
And I hear for the first the song has been in my heart - silent, unknown, even to me.
(Ruth Sohn, The Torah, A Women’s Commentary, pg. 406)

I thank you for these ten years of being your bishop. I remain deeply honored, engaged, hopeful, challenged, and blessed. I love you all.

I want to offer you some final time for conversation. Here are a few questions to help you learn together.

How would you describe your congregational identity?
Who are your partners, including your enemies, for faith and reconciliation?
What impossible thing might God be asking of you? What would be your first, gritty steps?