

## **“Seeking More, Hiding Less”**

Mother’s Day Message: May 8, 2022

*Series: Recharge: Plug into the Power of the Spirit Week 2*

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Imagine with me for a moment that this room is dark and it's late at night. The lights are turned off, and all you can see is the red glow of the exit signs plus the dim lighting from the parking lots shining in. No cell phones, no flashlight, and you are fumbling around in the dark searching for a person who is hiding. This, my friends, is a beloved game called Sardines that’s based on the childhood game Hide and Seek, except played in the dark, and when you find the person who is hiding, you cram into the same hiding spot, hence the name Sardines. The hidden teen quietly waits to be found while the rest of us search the whole church to find them. Inevitably, I would be one of the last seekers, roaming around in the dark because I was more comfortable seeking, than hiding. This is rather ironic, because in life, I had become a master at hiding- hiding my feelings and emotional struggles, preferring to bury pain deep inside where others couldn’t see it. I didn't know I was waiting to be found.

Good morning, my name is Carrie Steele, and my husband Dave and I have been members here at Woodside for many years. Today, as we honor the remarkable women in our lives who shaped us, our mothers and other amazing women who mothered us along the way, I stand here to share my faith story with you, and share how my life has been transformed as I am learning to abide in the Lord. For many of the early years, my faith was very simple. I grew up in the Presbyterian Church where my parents faithfully served in every aspect of church life. My fledgling faith grew as I did, and worship and missions became important to me early in my faith journey. I was baptized with water from the Jordan River and committed my life to Christ in 8th grade as I was also confirmed with my classmates into the church body. This was also my first time being able to partake in Communion and my pastor spoke of Jesus being a Vine and God was the Gardener. The imagery was a little lost on me, but I was just thrilled to be a part of the church officially. However, that zeal didn’t last beyond high school as I failed to connect to a faith group at Penn State, which led to a decade in a spiritual desert. My college sweetheart Dave and I were married on December 28, 1996 and in the spring of 1997 we moved to Yardley. Our first visit to Woodside just happened to be a loud and crazy VBS Sunday- it was nothing like my home church. However, when the Hallelujah children's choir began to sing a song I used to sing as a child, joyful tears began to flow. God had found me after many years of hiding.

In the fall of 1997, as we sat in the new member classes, Dave told our new friends we thought the Woodside preschool would be a wonderful place for our children to grow. Little did we realize the waiting we would have to endure and the challenges ahead. As newlyweds, we were very busy building a life, and both of us had started graduate school. When asked to serve, we made a small yes, to deliver welcome bags to new visitors. After we both finished our Masters degrees, we became more involved. I was terrified as I agreed to work with the senior high youth because I felt insecure in my bible knowledge and didn't feel prepared to lead these teens. Gradually, I learned from many other awesome leaders and God was slowly revealing Himself to me in mighty ways. I developed a passion for contemporary worship and loved igniting a heart for mission within the youth; it all felt so right. Saturday night lock-ins and hours of Sardines became routine, and my love for the Woodside youth grew, so much so that when I talked to people at work or the grocery store, they assumed I had a LOT of children because I often called the youth “my kids”. For me, worship has always been an important way I abide in the Lord, and during the easy times, praise and prayer were natural. But during this busy season of life, I sometimes struggled to praise God when life got hard and challenging. I was working as a neonatal nurse practitioner, teaching in a prominent grad school, and very busy serving here at Woodside. Dave and I were blessed with

amazing parents, siblings we adored who married wonderful spouses and further filled our family with nieces and nephews we got to love and nurture, but we had no children of our own. Our life was very full but not what I planned, and my prayers became selfish and filled with self-pity and lament. It was hard to seek God and I found myself hiding my sorrows and fears, even while serving the church. I began to read the bible more as I prepared lessons for the senior high youth meetings and retreats, and began to cling to powerful verses like Psalm 118:14- The Lord is my strength and my song; He has given me victory. As I connected with the Word of God, I gained a new perspective. I saw myself as a new creation in Christ, and no longer struggled with who I was but was confident in WHOSE I was. I was a beloved daughter of the Lord and this identity gave me such freedom. Despite my new freedom and my new identity, pain lingered deep within my heart that I hid from others.

Several events here at Woodside really sparked my faith to grow. First, I was attending the Alpha Course that teaches the core principles of the Christian faith. Because I grew up in the church, my prideful ways led me to believe I didn't need Alpha, but boy was I wrong! I felt myself dig deeper and fell in love with Jesus and began to learn about the Holy Spirit during Alpha. And because our host Bruce and Judy Jones had just been on Woodside's first international mission trip, it also marked the beginning of Dave and I traveling to the Dominican Republic for ten day mission trips each summer. There I saw in action what dependency on the Lord looked like, and witnessed the joy of abiding in the Lord daily. I found spiritual mentors there and my family grew to include my Dominican father Santo, and many brothers and sisters in Christ in the small towns of San Miguel, Pantoja, and of course the capital Santo Domingo. These mountain top experiences were exactly that, but the rest of life was lived in the valleys of daily busy life.

After Alpha and the DR trips, our church read the 40 Days of Purpose by Pastor Rick Warren, and we committed to attend a growth group-- this was so outside of our comfort zones and I was seriously fearful of being exposed for the weak Christian I was. See I was very busy looking at all the successful working women and strong mothers who served faithfully and I felt so inadequate. I compared myself to others and I felt like a failure. Dave began suffering debilitating migraines after an accident at work, and multiple treatment plans failed. Life quickly became overwhelmingly hard; this included the pain of broken dreams of having a family. I was not waiting well, and felt unworthy and rejected, as these negative thought patterns began to rule my mind. I was filled with self-hatred, but rarely let that be known to the rest of the world. I preferred hiding behind a big smile while burying the hard stuff deep within me. I hid my pain by being busy and serving others.

So let's recap briefly: I was a happily married, suburban DINK at Woodside, serving lots, was very busy and internally struggling with negative feelings and big emotions which blocked my ability to abide in the Lord so instead I hid.

The massive earthquake in Haiti occurred on January 12, 2010, and three weeks later, I was serving in Haiti where God further broke my heart for what broke His. Despite my feeling of inadequacy, I began to lead healthcare trips to Haiti to help heal broken bodies and broken lives. I witnessed the profound faith of the Haitians who praised the Lord and abided in Him as they sung joyfully and held up one another's arms in praise to the Lord while wrapped in gauze over amputated limbs or limbs with metal frames holding broken bones together. Though victims of a natural disaster, they did not withhold their praise to a loving and merciful God. Their faith was FAR stronger than my own faith. Thankfully the Holy Spirit was also transforming me as I served. My family grew again to include young adults who called me mum, and more Brothers and Sisters in Christ filled my heart and challenged my faith. Back home, while I yearned to abide in the Lord and worship freely like my Haitian and Dominican brothers and sisters, I was busy being busy. I avoided the painful issues of chronic migraines, my empty womb

and unfulfilled dreams that caused hurt at home. Though avoiding painful truths had become a way of life, I began to seek the Lord more honestly, because bible verses like Philippians 4:13 said that “I could do ALL things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me”. Not just some things, but ALL things. I began attending prayer services and spent hours in worship and kept a prayer journal where I journaled my way through very hard feelings and emotions, sin, and painful truths. I would write down key sermon points and action statements, confess, repent, seek forgiveness, forgive others, and write a litany of prayers for those I loved.

One evening during a really dark time, I met with a trusted friend who loved Jesus; together I prayed my way through the pain of sin and failure, and accepted the forgiveness that Jesus died to give me. Slowly, John 10:10 became my battle cry. **The Thief comes to rob and kill and destroy but I have come that they might have life abundantly.** My time of seeking and abiding in the Lord brought on a transformation of my darkest pain into something beautiful as I began to come into agreement with how abundant my life already was, even without children. The Lord delivered Dave and I into a new season. See I was being pruned and the Master Gardener had so much He needed to cut off from me. **John 15:1-4** “I am the true vine and the Father is the Gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so it will bear even more fruit.” I began to understand how deeply my avoidance of pain caused more hurt to myself and Dave. I needed a heavy pruning. My sinful pride offended the Lord, but my repentant heart surrendered to the powerful love of God. The Lord stepped into my Egypt where I was a slave to negative thinking and He delivered me into FREEDOM in CHRIST. **Romans 12:2** reads “Do not conform to the patterns of this world but let your mind be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” My faith grew stronger as I allowed the Holy Spirit to renew my mind, and I yielded to the Lord giving up my pride and right to be in charge. I was done being overly busy and slowed down to live life the abundant life I was given. I continued to lead mission trips, but with more humility which the Lord was growing in me. I prayed with others and ushered them to the Lord in prayer as *He* delivered them into their freedom from negative thinking and sin. I even said yes to being an adult growth group leader despite feeling insanely ill-prepared. This simple act of obedience to lead a growth group was my abiding response to God’s great love and a step in trusting that His will is better than my own. As I chose to abide in the Lord, the Lord God continued to not only sustain Dave and I but to abundantly provide for us in extraordinary ways.

In January 2012, my dear Brother in Christ Pastor Michel Valentin visited our church, and afterwards Dave and I hosted a brunch. Valentin prayed mightily for Woodside, the church leaders, for Haiti and missionaries, and he closed by praying for Dave and I and the “surprise that was coming at the end of the year”. Was he referring to the healing that I had been faithfully praying for Dave for so many years? I was finally learning to let God be God because He is much better at controlling the world than I was, and He was Dave’s healer, not me. Secretly though, Dave and I were again contemplating having a family. NO one knew this other than Dave and I. No one....except God. Valentin’s prayer was the first of four prophecies spoken over me. On September 18, 2012, my 44th birthday, I was given the most miraculous birthday gift– a positive pregnancy test. I sobbed tears of joy and praised God and yielded to His will for this baby, and for however long I would carry. Within a few more weeks, two more dear friends prayed for a son for Dave and I. While 11 weeks pregnant, I returned to Haiti where a complete stranger in the airport shocked me by telling me that “The Lord was going to give me a son.” I was also overjoyed to quietly share with Valentin that I was pregnant and we both cried tears of profound joy at what the Lord was doing in Haiti and in me. My pregnancy progressed smoothly. May 27th was the due date, and by God’s grace, on May 28th, 2013 the spoken prophecies came true- we welcomed our son John David into the world. It was also the tenth anniversary of Dave’s accident. Who else but God could transform this day so powerfully as He turned our mourning into dancing! The Gospel of Luke 1:37 declares “For nothing is impossible with God”. I know this to be true.

In the busy season of having a baby and the life changing goodness and exhaustion that comes with such joy, the Lord gave me another opportunity to follow Him and abide in Him. Though in truth, I tried to avoid this gift, mostly because it wasn't in my plan. John was 3 ½ years old when I was invited to work towards my PhD in Nursing Science. I tried to say no, but the Lord urged me forward. When my studies got harder and I tried to quit, the faculty made it easier for me to continue my studies, likely because it was the Lord's will, not my own. This has been a powerful message to me about the faithfulness of God when we chose to abide in Him and endure and trust this pruning process, knowing the Lord will bring good out of this challenge.

As the coronavirus pandemic started in January 2020, so did a new series of health struggles for my husband which disrupted his life terribly. Despite months of extensive work up of tests and procedures, the root cause remained unknown. As a nurse practitioner, I was desperately driven to see his health restored. I prayed continually, did medical lit searches, determined to gain insight into Dave's suffering. And we juggled being John's school teacher, as the exhaustion and fear of the pandemic swirled around us. Finally two months ago in early March there was a breakthrough of sorts for both with a diagnosis and plan of care for Dave and a breakthrough in my PhD work. I felt hopeful for the first time in months and things were looking up! Until things came crashing down! Dave ended up in the hospital for nearly a week with testing and treatment. During one ride to the hospital a song by Cory Asbury deeply pierced my aching soul as he opened with "I won't forget the wonder of how You brought deliverance, the exodus of my heart. Cause You found me, You freed me, held back the waters for my release, oh Yahweh." I was overcome. Then the bridge of the song declared "You stepped into my Egypt, you took me by the hand, you marched me into freedom, into the Promised Land!" I began to cry aloud as the song continued and I worshiped. Instead of delving further into self-pity, fear of the unknown, and self-reliance, I decided to WELCOME the pruning season this time. I immediately praised God in this storm and recalled His faithfulness to both Dave and I. And in my car, driving on Route 1 I chose to abide, responding with obedience and trust in the Sovereign Lord who remained in control. **John 15:5 reads "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing."** Less hiding, more seeking.

My story is one of learning to abide in the Lord and choosing to remain in Him even when life gets hard. It's choosing to trust that God is still good even when He is silent and makes us wait. My faith has deepened as I learned to depend on the Lord more and myself less. Jesus promises us that we will have trials and tribulations but to take heart because He has overcome the world! He also promises to remain with us in the hard times. Thanks be to God who continues to prune and refine us for His glory alone. Abiding in the Lord for me means I pray even when it's hard, and recall the Lord's provision for me despite my failures. I read the bible and focus on declaring God's truth for me instead of my own truth that I can distort. And I choose to trust in the Lord God Almighty who is greater in us than he who is of this world. Please hear me when I say that this is not about not asking for help and finding comfort with others when we are weak and hurting. The Great Commandment is to love God and then love one another. We do this best by living in community and caring for one another through life's difficult trials by sharing Christ's love here and now. I am suggesting that when the storms of life rage, we can choose not to run and hide, but to seek and be found by the One who never abandons us, whose mercy and grace are unfailing. I suggest that we position ourselves before the Lord and abide in Him. I ask you to ponder what your Egypt looks like? What is blocking you from experiencing the fullness of God? What idols or patterns of responses to life's trials make you run and hide? Are you willing to allow God to find you and enter into your captivity, your Egypt, to set you free? My prayer for you is this: may God find you seeking Him more and hiding less as you choose to abide in the Lord.