This morning I will kick off a three-part vision series that will be rooted in scripture but also speaks to our life together here at Colonial. I recognize that some of you here this morning are visiting for the first time, or perhaps you are here hoping to simply hear the proclamation of the gospel, and a vision series does not sound interesting to you in the least. I understand. So let me simply say this to everyone here: our story as a congregation, as families, as individuals, is ultimately HIS STORY…History. And HIS STORY is incredibly important, not only because of what happened in the past, but also the way those events shape the way we think of God and the way we think of ourselves. His Story also informs the way we think about our future.

Exodus 3:6, And God said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

When we think about biblical history, and really, to some degree, our own history as a church, a lot of that history falls into two categories: patriarchs and deliverance stories. First: patriarchs. Patriarchs are those leaders who hold prominence in our memory as trailblazers, leaders, teachers, and builders. I’m speaking generally here, so please don’t think I’m simply speaking of MEN…when I say patriarchs I’m assuming those iconic leaders from both genders that we remember and hold in high regard. In the Bible, God identifies Himself, and the nation of Israel is also identified by their association with three primary patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We see that over and over again in texts like Exodus 3:6, And God said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

When we think of our history together as a church, we also have Patriarchs, don’t we? Those who have been around Colonial for the past 63 years remember Pastor Norman Krebs, Pastor Ted Nissen, Pastor Richard Beech, and many others who helped establish, lead, and build this congregation called Colonial. Don’t get me wrong, there have been hundreds and thousands of men and women who have faithfully followed Christ and served to help Colonial thrive as a local church, but we tend to talk about our history in terms of those identifiable leaders. And don’t forget, we are very fortunate to have a real, live patriarch still on our staff, Pastor Bob Lehleitner, who has now been serving at Colonial for 45 years! I have on many occasions sought to honor our patriarchs and matriarchs who led us to become a church who loves the Word of God and seeks to follow Jesus, but this morning I would like to turn our attention to the second main theme in biblical history.
Woven into biblical history, at the beginning, at the center, and now as we approach the end…we find a common theme: Deliverance. Our God is a God who delivers. As we read the Old Testament, Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt is the PRIMARY means by which they understand who God is and who they are. God defines Himself in Exodus 20 in terms of deliverance. In vs. 1 He says, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The Israelites also refer to deliverance as the defining narrative of their identity. In Psalm 105, hundreds of years after the Exodus, the psalmist recalls the deliverance narrative of Israel, “So He brought out Israel…He brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. And he gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the fruit of the peoples’ toil, that they might keep his statutes and observe His laws. Praise the Lord!” For thousands of years now the Jews have observed Passover, remembering the night that they were delivered out of the hands of the Egyptians by a God who delivers.

King David also understood God to be a God who delivers, even at a young age. In 1 Samuel 17:37 we read, David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

When we zoom into the center of history, we see Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh who came and dwelt among us. And what is the nature of God in the flesh? He delivers. Jesus delivers people from blindness to sight; from crippled to dancing; from demon possession to freedom; from shame to restoration; from cowardice to courage; from death into everlasting life.

The narrative of deliverance is profoundly central to the biblical text, because that’s what God does: He delivers. He delivers nations, He delivers families, and He delivers individuals. For many of us, our personal narrative of knowing God in Jesus Christ is a story of deliverance in some way. In the spiritual sense, all believers have been delivered from death into eternal life through the forgiveness of our sins made possible by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, but in addition to our spiritual deliverance, many of us have very practical stories of God’s deliverance that changed our lives and the way we think of God: we were delivered from addictions, we were delivered from falsehood, we were delivered from sickness, we were delivered from bitterness, we were delivered from a life-threatening situation, and so on. I would guess that most people who walk closely with God have a deliverance narrative. That is true for individuals, and it’s true for groups of people who assemble together as believers. This morning I would like to prepare you for some thoughts about our future by recalling our recent narrative of deliverance...a narrative that informs how we, as “Colonialites”, remember God’s activity in our church, which inevitably informs the way we think of God’s call upon our lives moving ahead.

2008: Again, Colonial has been around for 63 years, but I want to begin this narrative by taking us back to 2008...that is when I moved to Kansas City to serve as your Lead Pastor. When I
arrived in KC and began my work here at Colonial, I would say we were under the oppression of three D’s: debt, denomination, and disorganization. Now, make sure you hear me: I’m not pinning blame on anyone, nor am I trying to over-dramatize the situation to make a point. These were the very words that I heard over and over again from many, many people that I met with for the first several months in 2008: in so many words they made clear to me that our congregation was subject to… hindered by…suffering under the weight of 1) 11 million dollars of debt and obligation associated with the construction of Quivira and the Wornall Youth Houses, including our obligation to construct 137th on the Quivira property; 2) incompatibility with a denomination that continued to drift into unbiblical doctrine and practice; and 3) an organizational model that had caused confusion and disunity in the church.

So…after much prayer and many hours in meetings with Elders and Staff, we rolled out our first vision talk on November 9, 2008 entitled “Give It Away.” Now before I talk about what we said and what we did, let me just define what a “vision talk” is: A vision is a preferred picture of our future that compels the hearts of people to engage. As those entrusted with the mantle of leadership, it is our best attempt at saying, “here’s where we are, and here’s where we need to go, and here’s what we think it will look like when we get there.” But it’s more than that: the vision inspires the heart and imagination of people who can see how their lives can be used by God to accomplish that vision. Let’s look at a biblical example: God gave Moses a compelling vision through a conversation they had around a burning bush. He essentially said, “I’ve heard the cries of my people, so I’m sending you, and through you I will liberate my people from Egypt and deliver them to a land flowing with milk and honey.” You get the vision right? God’s people are enslaved, so working through Moses, and Aaron, and eventually the leadership team that Moses will assemble, God will deliver the people called the Israelites out from where they are…which is no longer where God wants them…and He will lead them to the place God desires for them to go. A better place, a land with hope and promise, because it is the place God is leading them to. Once there, we can assume that God will give them further instructions. WE can almost imagine God saying “For now, Moses…that’s all you need to know…now get started.”

That’s typically how vision talks work: we identify where we’ve been, where we are, and where we now feel God is calling us to go. We paint a picture of the value and the God-honoring outcomes if we are willing to get up from where we are and trust God to follow Him into new lands.

There are plenty of biblical precedents for this kind of leadership, but I want you to know that we take this process very seriously. As elders we seek the Lord in prayer, we seek Him in scripture, we listen intently for how God is speaking through you…the church, we scan the horizon to see if the Holy Spirit is highlighting a particular opportunity or need or value that informs the way we should go. And after all of that, we refine the vision to address both the needs that are
obvious within the church, as well as those opportunities and mandates we sense from the Lord that are new ground which we are being called out to pursue.

So, in 2008, here’s essentially what our preferred future looked like according to the vision talk called “Give It Away.”

1) We redefined our mission as an organization devoted to making disciples…those who are becoming selfless, passionate followers of Jesus. To learn how we were doing in that regard, we had already signed up to take the REVEAL spiritual life inventory, and we committed to make some changes based upon what we learned. We took that survey three times in six years, and the assessment scores from the first time to the third time were so dramatic that Willow Creek called us up to find out what happened! Self-knowledge helps a lot when it comes to leading a group of people.

2) We had a dream that one day we could GIVE AWAY our multi-site status to come alongside and assist small, struggling congregations in our denomination (at the time there were 50 PCUSA churches in the metro who could not afford a senior pastor). We dreamed of inviting these smaller, struggling congregations to be part of our family of churches free of charge with no strings attached. They would hopefully benefit from our partnership and either stay with us or resume their independence once they felt strong enough to thrive without us. You should know that this particular aspect of the 2008 vision gripped the hearts and imaginations of many people at Colonial. This church has always loved, supported, encouraged, and desired to assist smaller congregations throughout Kansas City, and that vision helped us to believe that the messy, difficult process of becoming a multi-site congregation might be powerfully redeemed if that allowed us to serve the greater church in our city.

3) We cast a vision for getting deeply involved with the plight of the orphan, and quite specifically on the continent of Africa. Our vision was to partner with the organization now known as the Global Orphan Project to create safe refuge for orphans in Kenya, specifically near Nairobi where I had been promised 40 acres of land by the mayor of Nairobi shortly before coming to Colonial.

4) We also cast vision for investing deeply into the KC urban core, even to the degree that we would have an urban expression of Colonial as one of our sites.

5) Internally, we committed to the value of decentralization and efficiency. Instead of driving every decision from a central authority, we proposed decentralizing all ministries so that each site would have site pastors, children and youth ministries, worship directors and so on…as well as a site-specific leadership team comprised of staff, elders, and deacons who would have
authority to oversee and administrate day-to-day operations without having to be bogged down in bureaucracy and red tape.

So what happened after that vision was cast in November 2008? Well, we naturally set out to do what we said we would do. We took the REVEAL survey and learned a lot…it was not flattering, but it was helpful, and that led to a year in the Bible in 2009 where we really immersed ourselves in the Word as a church. Shortly after the vision I jumped on an airplane with some Colonial leaders to pursue our orphan work in Nairobi, but while we were there we discovered that the church we had planned to partner with was in a state of civil-war…that was very disillusioning. To date that project has not yet happened, though the Lord did in fact lead us into the orphan window in Africa! We ended up leading and developing a HUGE orphan project in Malawi through the Global Orphan Project. Several months later, our partner in Kenya, Jane Wanja Gitubia, left the embattled church to launch a small orphan project north of Nairobi, and Colonial has anchored that project now for six years. We also have orphan projects supported by Colonial in Haiti, where we have sent hundreds of people to engage in the ministry to orphans.

2009: By the summer of 2009 we were into a full-fledged reorganization around the new vision and our commitment to decentralize…it was not fun, but it didn’t take long to see that the new organizational model was far more fluid with a greater sense of clarity for staff, elders, and eventually church members.

We also approached Heartland Presbytery of the PCUSA with our vision of assisting smaller churches, but it became clear to us almost immediately that this part of our vision was going to be next to impossible if we had to go through the leadership that was there at the time. Our efforts to meet with Heartland on this inspiring vision brought into greater focus the vast gulf that had formed between the PCUSA and Colonial Presbyterian Church in theology and practice. Still, we prayed that God would make a way for us to serve the smaller churches. God answered that prayer, but not in the way we anticipated…more on that in a minute.

In terms of a renewed emphasis into the urban core, we took on several service projects, we jumped into the What If the Church? movement that led to new relationships with urban pastors, we re-upped our commitment to organizations like Freedom Fire and other partners serving in the urban core, and slowly but surely one of our own, Mark Potter, led first our youth ministry and then the adults at Wornall to begin investing powerfully into an urban core neighborhood just a few blocks from our location on 95th and Wornall. Our vision of a more racially diversified, engaged congregation in relationship with the urban core is slowly becoming a reality, and we’ll talk more about that next week.

2010: Now, by the time the reorg was finished and we were hard at work pursuing the vision we had set before the congregation, 2009 had come to an end and the Elders went on our annual
retreat in January of 2010. The agenda for the retreat was benign…the 2008 Give It Away vision was ambitious and barely underway, and as a new Senior Pastor I had spent more leadership equity than I had earned! I was in leadership debt! I literally told Ryan Gamble, the new clerk of Session, that I did not want to lead one more single, solitary change at Colonial for at least a year! That was not God’s plan, however, and He soon made that clear to the 19 Elders who assembled that weekend. I have never known the presence of God in a gathering of Elders like we experienced that first night.

In a matter of minutes, God’s agenda was pressing down upon us from every side, and our discernment became crystal clear: God wanted His church called Colonial out of the denomination we were in and He wanted us out of debt. Disorganization was something that the 2008 Vision addressed, but God would not be content until we led the congregation out of our crushing debt and the bondage of our increasingly unfaithful denomination, and we discerned the Lord to say in no uncertain terms, “START NOW.”

Many of you remember this chapter in our history…it was a trying time. Though we as elders were not in doubt regarding what we had discerned from the Lord, our mandate was to LEAD the congregation, not tell them what to do. So we began a three month process of discernment that included multiple town hall meetings at both sites, where both the Elders and leaders from our former denomination spoke. During that season of discernment, every family in our church received a threatening letter from Heartland Presbytery stating that if we chose to leave the PCUSA, they would acquire all of our property, and we would be left with nothing. Like Moses, I plead with the leadership of the Presbytery to “let my people go;” but to no avail. There is much I would say about that time in the life of our church, but the most important thing I want to say is that the Lord was faithful! Our church experienced unprecedented unity, and the Lord anointed our leaders with profound wisdom and a gentleness of heart, even as they stood fast under the harsh words and tactics of the leaders at Heartland Presbytery. Finally, on August 22, 2010, 97% of those in attendance voted to leave the PCUSA and affiliate with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. It was a great day! God had delivered us from our Egypt—a land where we did not belong, and he delivered us into a new family of churches that felt very much to us like a land flowing with milk and honey! However, not unlike the Israelites, we soon found ourselves standing before a river we could not cross, hounded by the “Egyptians” who sought to take away our property.

The day after we left the PCUSA, we were ushered us into a lawsuit over our property, and since we had property in Missouri and in Kansas, we were in lawsuits in both states. The lawsuits were inevitable and unavoidable. Heartland Presbytery and the PCUSA had made a claim upon our property, yet all the deeds, documents, and debt papers said that we owned the property. We were at an impasse. Because of the debt we could not abandon the property to the PCUSA, so we had no choice but to engage them in court. This was yet another dark and difficult time for all of
us who were close to this process. On four different occasions we approached Heartland in an effort to settle out of court, but they would not talk to us about a settlement…they wanted to establish a legal precedent that would stop other evangelical churches from leaving the denomination out of fear of losing their property. It became clear to us that our battle with the PCUSA was not just about us…ironically, our service to the smaller, like minded churches in Missouri was to fight the good fight, and with God’s help, win a legal precedent that would pave the way for others to leave without contestation and expensive litigation. Shortly after our exodus, the Lord led me to preach through the whole Gospel of Luke, which immediately put us into a position of looking to Jesus each week, listening to His voice, humbling ourselves in obedience. That journey through Luke increased my faith…I think all of us began to see Jesus more clearly…which was good, because what was to come next would require more faith than any of us thought we had.

Skip ahead one year to August of 2011. We are still in litigation with Heartland in the MO and KS courts. The economy has tanked. The litigation expenses, combined with the debt, combined with great insecurity in the congregation led to massive financial shortfalls in 2010 and 2011. In our weekly meeting that summer, Randy Shaneyfelt, our Director of Finance and Administration, informs me that at our current rate, we would be bankrupt by April of 2012. That was stressful, but once again the Elders gathered and sought the LORD in earnest prayer. Over the course of several weeks, the Elders discerned that God had not changed His mind at all! Our mandate was to get out of debt, and start now! Talk about a test of faith.

Biblically we saw ourselves standing before a river…we were being called to cross, the opposition was closing in on us, but we saw no way to get to the other side. Through prayer we found ourselves in Joshua 3, when the Israelites are standing on the east side of the Jordan, and God gives direction to Joshua and the elders: “Take the Ark of the Covenant, you and the elders lead by stepping into the flood waters of the Jordan. When you do, I…the Lord your God…will part the waters, and the whole congregation will pass through.” So that is what we did. In the fall of 2011, we launched the most counterintuitive capital campaign in the history of Christianity! While being litigated against in two states, in the armpit of the economy, we faithfully set out to raise 9 million dollars in two years so that we could obediently lead the church to get out of debt, not knowing if we would even win our court case and keep our property. The officers of the church led the way with unprecedented sacrificial giving, and the congregation followed. Once again, the Lord was faithful. In two years-time, we raised close to 6 million dollars, more than we had ever raised in any 3-year capital campaign in Colonial’s history. During that same time our operating income increased, we met and surpassed our budget, and God helped us win our court cases in both states! By the end of 2012, our court cases were over, the property was secured, and our debt was greatly decreased. Today our debt balance is hovering at about 2.1 million, and in a few months from now, we should close on the sale of some land we own on
137th for the price of 2.1 million dollars. By September of this year, we anticipate that we will be finally delivered from our debt, even as we have been delivered from our former denomination.

Now…that’s as far as we’re going to go this morning. But I hope you heard our deliverance narrative. Our recent history has taught this congregation to pray and obey…to trust God to do that counterintuitive, generous, courageous act of obedience exactly when the world is most likely to say, “You must be crazy.” That’s part of our story. That’s part of our Salvation history at Colonial. So if, as we continue on into the next two weeks of this series…if you should hear something and think to yourself: “These Colonialites are out there…they seem to trust as certain that which they cannot see…they seem to have a confidence in the Lord that He will provide even when there is no help in sight…they seem to hold prayer and obedience as sacred in their life together…” well, now you know.

That’s who we’ve been…that’s who we are…and that informs who we are becoming. We are a delivered people, and we serve a God who delights in delivering those who are in bondage. We know that our call is join our King in all the places where He is delivering those whom He loves…and that’s going to shape the choices we make and the initiatives we pursue.

Let me ask you something: what about you? What’s your salvation story? How has God called you to trust Him when it seems crazy to trust Him? How has God faithfully delivered you? Listen: if you know you are in bondage this morning…if you know you are under the tyranny of an oppressor who does not love you…Call out to your Father in heaven. He hears the cries of the oppressed, and He is a God who delivers. Call upon the name He gave us to call upon. It is the name above all names…it is the name of Jesus. Will you pray with me?