

Easter Vigil
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This is the night, when God brought the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and led them through the Red Sea onto dry land.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life

This is the night when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell and rose victorious from the grave. This is the night.

There is no other night such as this. The Easter Vigil is historically the single most important service of the church year. Oh yes, the throngs will turn out tomorrow decked in Easter bonnets and snow coats and our culture tells us that tomorrow is the most important day in the Christian calendar but our tradition tells us otherwise. Tonight is the night; tonight is the night when people all around the world will profess the Christian faith under the flame of the paschal candle and in the waters of baptism.

In the earliest days of Christianity, catechumens spent three years preparing for this event, this life of transformation, this life of accepting Christ. Picture the darkness of the catacombs, those rooms buried beneath the streets of Rome where Christians gathered to pass on the faith through baptism. Baptism is where the hunger of faith is met and the life long work of living into faith is begun. In baptism, we die to an old way of life and are raised to a new life. Baptism immerses us in the confluence of water, oil and fire. Through these rich symbols, which emerge from two thousand of years of tradition and scripture, we are healed of the wounds of the world and brought to the top of the mountain of faith. In the renewal of our baptismal vows, we join with millions of Christians around the world who have gathered to recommit themselves to Christ.

As a priest, I cherish the opportunity to walk through the mystery of faith and assist people with asking better and deeper questions. In the four gospels, Jesus is asked 183 questions but he only answers three of them. Answering questions is not the essence of spiritual companionship or even spiritual authority. Walking alongside, journeying together is a more apt description of life in Christian community. Remember that faith sees the invisible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible. In no other service of the Christian year, is the mystery of our faith expressed as deeply as in this Easter Vigil.

The stories of salvation, such as we hear during this magnificent service, shape our understanding of God. Scripture provides a certain lens through which we view and experience life and no better parts of the Bible are able to assist with this than the stories of the Easter Vigil. Where in our lives are we crossing the Red Sea escaping the Egyptians? Who are the Egyptians in our lives? What does the Promised Land look like to us? Where have we experienced dry bones and where have we experienced God

breathing new life into us. When have we been like Abraham, being obedient to God to the point where we would risk that which is dearest to us? And when have we felt our spirit has died only to experience the miracle of resurrection?

As people of faith, you dare not walk away from the challenging stories contained in our Holy Writ. Learn them; enter into them because someday that same darkness will engulf you in some way or another: death of a loved one, loss of a job, financial ruin, addiction or whatever else may cross your path. Knowing the stories of darkness prepares us for the hard times and the eventual joy of salvation because we know that Jesus did not remain in the tomb. We know that he broke free from the bonds of death and that the same breaking free is available to us if we are patient and faithful. The stories of scripture are not about other people, they are about us!

On one level they are, of course, about other people. Learning the history, understanding the background and the cast of characters is important. But if we don't dance with these stories and understand them as stories about us, we will have missed the whole point. In the great stories of salvation, we aren't meant to figure them out or to come up with superficial explanations. We are meant to live with the tension and discover resurrection in that tension. Who can give any kind of reasonable explanation as to why Abraham would seem to be willing to kill his son Isaac? We can't try to answer that. The real question is whether or not we are willing to journey to those places where the knife has been over our hearts and God has intervened at the last moment. Are we able to live with that tension?

On this night we celebrate and live into God's deliverance of his people who are at times holy and at others not holy at all. But God keeps offering the possibility of order out of the darkness, a ram instead of our hearts, the Promised Land after slavery, restoration after a flood and resurrection in the place of an empty tomb. These are the promises that God has made to us. He made them to us long ago and he makes them to us through baptism and will continue to make them from now until eternity. Tonight we proclaim and embrace the central tenant of our faith - Jesus was dead and now he lives. Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed alleluia!