

Saturday, April 20, 2019

Great Vigil of Easter

Genesis 7.15, 11-18, 8.6-18, 9.8-17; Exodus 14.10-31, 15.20-21; Ezekiel 31.1-14;

Romans 6.3-11; Luke 24.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Happy birthday!

No, I haven't lost my mind. Although at this point in our Holy Week and Easter celebrations, that is entirely possible. But I assure you, that is not the case.

During our worship services this Holy Week, we have focused on the parallels between the original Jewish Passover and the New Passover that began on Maundy Thursday, continued into Good Friday, and culminates on this most holy of nights. Today, on Easter, on this Feast of the Resurrection, we witness the culmination of that New Passover experience. The promise of our passing from bondage to freedom through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God—through the death of Jesus Christ. That culmination coming in the form of Christ's Resurrection from the dead. And we celebrate the fact that through his sacrifice for us on the cross, Jesus took our sins upon himself. And that through his death, the bondage of sin itself was destroyed. And that in his rising from the dead, the bondage of death itself was destroyed. This is the Passover—our Passover—with Christ from darkness to light, from sinfulness to redemption, from bondage to freedom, from death to life. This is the celebration of our entering into new life. So not only is this our New Passover, this is also our birthday. Our birthday into new and eternal life.

This New Passover, this birthday of us all, is something that has been in the works from the beginning of creation. We see this theme of new life being played out throughout salvation history. In our Vigil tonight, we highlighted just a few of the key events that paved the way, that provided indications that all of salvation history has been moving to this single point. Stories that remind us not only of the arc of salvation history, but also of our place in that history. Stories that remind us that our story can never be separated from God's story.

We first heard the recounting of the story of Noah and the Flood. How God, seeking to wipe out the sinfulness of humanity, caused a great flood to cover the earth, destroying all that had been created with the exception of eight individuals and two of every other living thing. This was the opportunity for humanity and indeed, for all of creation, to be born anew. A new birthday for all that God had created. An opportunity for creation to pass over to a new existence, this time in right relationship with God.

In the Christian Era, the Church has seen in this story an image for the Church itself. The ark being an image for the Church—a vessel of salvation for humanity. The wood of the ark being likened to the wood of the cross, which itself provides the means of redemption and salvation for humanity. The waters of the flood being likened to baptism—waters that bring about new life. And the dove being an image for the Holy Spirit, bringing God's divine peace.

We then heard the quintessential Passover story—that of Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea. How the Israelites, fleeing bondage in Egypt, passed through the waters of the Red Sea on their journey to liberation in the Promised Land. To their new life of freedom. How that which had been the source of oppression of the people—the Egyptians—was defeated.

In the Christian Era, the Church has seen in this story an image of itself, of the people of God, being brought through the waters of baptism, bringing liberation from the bondage of sin and death. So important is this imagery to our story as God’s people that it is the only story of salvation history that is required to be read at the Great Vigil of Easter.

And then we heard the story of the Valley of Dry Bones. A prophecy made to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon that they will be returned to their land. That God will gather the desiccated remnant of the people together and breathe new life into them.

In the Christian Era, the Church has interpreted the story of the Valley of Dry Bones in various ways. The resuscitation of dead bones being an image for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ himself. In the bringing of new life, a promise of the new life available to all God’s people through baptism. And even the new life, the eternal life, that is the hope and promise of the resurrection of the dead at the end of the ages. And in the very actions of God, of the Word spoken to the dry bones, and the Spirit breathing life into the bones, we see a foreshadowing of the work of the Trinity.

All of these stories of salvation history point to the promised fulfillment that is only made possible through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we heard in our Gospel reading. How the women went to the tomb to perform the proper burial rituals on Jesus’ body. Only to find that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. How they are told by two angels, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Lk 24.5-7).

But the events of salvation history do not end with the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter. The death and resurrection of Christ are not merely a past historical events, but continue to be present realities for we who are ourselves dead, yet alive in Christ. In our reading from Romans, Paul explains what the events of Easter morning mean to us. How the effects of the death and resurrection of Christ are made available to those who are baptized. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6.3-5).

The story of salvation history continues on through us. Through our lives of faith. It is a story that is continuing to be written, even as we speak. The most recent chapter was written just a few minutes ago, with the baptism of Kinsley, Kohen, and Sarah. With their incorporation into the Resurrected Body of Christ. With their birth into new life as Christians. The story of salvation history will continue to be written by them, as they grow into their baptismal vows. As

they live into their lives of faith. As they share the story of their relationship with God and Christ in their words and actions.

Just as each of us write our own chapters of the ever expanding story of salvation history through our own lives, through our own witness, through our own ministries. As we each continue to live into the fullness of new life that we celebrate tonight.

So, happy birthday!

Oh, and

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!