
FROM THE PULPIT

The Great Vigil of Easter

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Note: This sermon was preached at St. Mark's Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the Great Vigil of Easter in 2010. The Great Vigil is the highest and longest service in the liturgical churches. It begins in darkness and starts with the kindling of a fire. The congregation then listens in darkness lit only by candles to the readings of the salvation moments in the scriptures: the Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, the Valley of the Dry Bones, the eschatological gathering of God's people, and the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

My parents, in a nice haphazard sort of a way exposed me early on to the basic classical literature and ideas that they thought I needed to know. The raciness of some of the Greco-Roman myths was not lost on them, but they thought that perhaps the myths were not much more risqué than the stories that I was likely to encounter in the scriptures (which is true) and besides, surely it was better to learn about the birds and bees from the Greeks and Romans than from the gossip and innuendo of schoolchildren or the pages of a magazine. My father, being a scientist at heart, thought that it wouldn't be a bad idea to learn about the classical version of science, and so he taught me about the four elements, of which the ancients thought that all material was composed: earth, air, fire, and water. All the elements are present in us: the water in our bodies, the earthy fleshiness of us, the air in our lungs, and the fire in our minds and hearts.

I did not long remain with the Greeks and Romans, but moved on into Norse mythology, and on from there into the stories of other religions; and soon it became relatively clear to me, even as a child, that certain images and themes, certain fears and hopes cross the lines of faith, culture, and history. The hero with a

thousand faces, the primal fears of darkness, of drowning in deep waters, the “panic” of the woods at night, of death, the gift and danger of fire—these are images and stories that continue with force and power in all ages and cultures and faiths.

I always feel as if the Great Vigil of Easter is that most fundamental of Christian services because it is composed of those basic images: new fire kindled, water in the baptismal font, earth over a tomb, and air coming back into stilled lungs. And the stories that we recollect tonight, the stories of God’s great salvation wrought over many, long years are stories that are fundamentally about who we are, why we are the way we are, and how God interacts with us.

First, there is the story of creation. God separates the waters and draws forth land from the waters. God sets the lights in the sky, the fiery sun and stars, and then out of the earth draws trees and creatures and finally sculpts humans out of the earth, filled with the breath of God. The first act of God that we comprehend and know is that God has created—has created order—and brought waters, and fire, and earth, and air into some kind of miraculous balance, and declared it good.

But, as has always been, and will be until our final healing, human hearts and minds were capable of darkening; and so the waters that were kept in check were poured out upon the earth; but even in His wrath and destruction, God did not abandon His creation. He saved the earth and air that were animals and humans, and wrote in the air of the sky with water the sign and symbol of His covenant.

Ages later, when His covenanted people—those in the long lineage of Noah and Abraham—were enslaved, God sent His servant Moses to free them and lead them from bondage. He went before them in fire and cloud, parted the waters so that they could walk on dry earth, protected and saved them.

And although again their hearts and minds were darkened, God fed them in the wilderness and gave them water from the rock. Though they were forced to walk the earth for forty years, yet still God protected and fed them and, at the last, brought them into the Promised Land where they were home.

Even there, even full of the knowledge of God’s sustenance and graciousness, brought into the fullness of God’s covenant

with them, symbolized in the gift of land, their hearts and minds were darkened, and so God sent the prophets to call them to repentance, and to declare to them the graciousness of God: the God who gives waters to the thirsty, and rain and snow upon the earth; the God who transforms the skeletal wreck of death into flesh, and breathes upon that flesh, and restores life to it.

Earth and air, water and fire: the great elements that are present tonight in their primal way, that have deep places in the human mind and experience, and that are the signs of God's action and presence in the world throughout the long record of the forging of God's salvation.

Lent began forty days ago, on Ash Wednesday, with the reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. As quickly as the grass withers, the air will leave our lungs for the last time, and our loved ones will take our bodies, and cover them with earth, and we will return to the ground from which we and all that lives have been drawn. And so the question of tonight, or perhaps of our lives is a simple one: If, after lives of unending struggle against the darkness that constantly invades our human minds and hearts, those hearts will stop beating, and we—you and I—will go down to death, what does the little fire we have kindled together in this night matter?

What does it matter if God is evident in occasional moments, in fire, water, air, and earth? Where is our salvation?

The question is, "Can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3). My bones and your bones?

Tonight matters because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word became earth and air, was washed with the waters of baptism, and flamed with the fire of the Spirit. The God who is evident in the elements, who creates and sustains the creation, did not in the final peak of His salvation simply operate on the creation, on earth and air, fire and water, but became them. He tramped the earth of Palestine and ate of the earth's bounty. He drank and sailed the waters and breathed the wind blowing where it will. And His breath ceased, and His body died, and He was laid under earth, as we all one day will be.

But the story doesn't end there. If it did, tonight might matter little. The air of His lungs dissipated, His flesh as cold as the grave, the fire of His spirit extinguished; for three days, there is si-

lence. And yet He rises glorious. Here is the great reversal, not simply God's power acting again and again to save His people, to call Israel back and restore creation, but the death of death, the destruction of sinfulness, the freedom from bondage and the restoration of our right humanity. For He carries us with Him. And this is not some "sterile" "spiritual" resurrection. His resurrection is abundantly, overwhelmingly, gloriously full of matter. He carries us with Him in all the glory of His elemental physicality.

Since we have been baptized with Christ into His death, death no longer is terrible. Since we are the same earth and air as He, since we have been washed with the water of baptism, and set aflame with the fire of the Spirit, the resurrection raises us up from the darkness and death of our lives and hearts and makes our humanity glorious, our flesh like unto His own.

The Word became flesh and gives of the things of earth to sustain us—wheat for bread, water for wine, the stuff of earth become the things of heaven, all of it changed, redeemed, restored, because Christ is risen.

And this is not mere rhetoric. The darkness of our hearts and minds is there still, the darkness of the world still evident all around us. But as the Word has become flesh, as the light of His fire has burned in the darkness, even so the darkness did not overcome it. Christ rises glorious, scattering matter about Him like fire, His breath is warm and moist, the dust of the tomb still on Him, breaking the darkness around Him. He comes into my darkness, into your darkness, the real inane darknesses in which we often find ourselves, and He bids us rise and follow him. Christ is arisen as he promised. Death no longer has dominion. He is present to us always and makes of our world an endless, material delight. He fills our mouths with laughter and fills the hungry with His own flesh and blood. Alleluia, alleluia.