

The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night

April 7, 2012

I wonder what it was like when primitive humans first squinted at the astonishing wonder of fire. Fire is primal. And there it was, all at once, the first sensation of light without darkness. The discovery of fire must have been something like the dawn of creation itself: God beating back the darkness until there was light made perfect. And, like a great refrain, God said the work was good, very good. I cannot help but recall Michelangelo's monumental portrait of God in the Sistine Chapel, fashioning the universe with two mighty arms. Something good, very good was brought from that which was not. There was nothing but future ahead for that early community of human beings.

And so, like the Olympic torch, the hot, immortal flame has been passed to us this night. We come here only to encounter the wonder of the Easter fire, which has lit up the night. When the deacon raises the paschal candle born of those flames, we know the One who brought us fire yet a second time. "Light of Christ," sings the cantor. And we shout out, "Thanks be to God." What other response can there be but thanksgiving to a good and loving God who has given us hope. And so the cantor exclaims in the Exsultet: "Rejoice, O Mother Church! Exult in glory! The risen Savior shines upon you! Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God's holy people!"

Darkness again was cracked open by light on that first morning of the week when the women came to anoint Jesus. There was light on that first day of our new creation and it was very good. There was the angel to lead us out of our dark Egypt and into proclamation. And suddenly, there was a future where there had been none. And that is where the Gospel leaves us: with the deep, stunning news that the one they thought was dead has been raised up.

I think that on this Easter night we need to live in the reality of that shock, the God-awful, raw surprise of resurrection. When the angel told Mary Magdalene and the other women that “he is going before you to Galilee,” they went, shaking, to see what God had done. Something utterly, completely, astonishingly new. Yes, these bones can live. And they were going to live in that endless future, alive forever in Christ Jesus.

In a moment we will renew our baptismal promises, even as our own Sam and Kyle prepare to be plunged into the life-giving waters of God’s future. The descent into that font is a journey into the death of Christ, as Paul tells us. Yet, with the testimony of the angel and the light of fire to guide us, we will make our way through the waters once again. O happy fault! The past has been drowned. And when we get to the other side of the waters of baptism, all our fears will be dispelled by the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation given to us tonight by God as gift and food and drink for life’s journey.

New life.

New creation.

New future.

Christ has been raised, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Paul A. Magnano

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