

Easter Vigil 2024

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Opening

When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child. When I was a child I experienced Easter pretty much like Fr. Peter shared last Sunday. There was Palm Sunday, with the pomp and procession. Then there was Easter.

When I was a child, I knew my name and I knew that my parents were Helen and Dale. I tolerated my siblings for the most part.

*It was only later that I began to realize that one of the great challenges of life was to figure who I really was and who I was meant to be. And it was later still that I began to grasp that it wasn't even about me. **I was a part of a larger story.***

I was in my 20's when I experienced my first Easter Vigil. We didn't have such a thing when I was a child in the church. I returned to the church, trying to be an adult, and trying to figure out what an adult faith looks like.

I'm still working at that.

I know of no better expression of what adult Christianity is all about than the Easter Vigil.

That first Easter Vigil was for me the first of many that would follow – *up to the present moment*. I have come to experience this liturgy as the fullest possible expression of **who we are as Christians**, as human beings, as children of God. Through the years what we do here tonight has often taken my breath away.

Lighting Fire

The Kilauea volcano on the Big Island of Hawaii was in a continuous eruption from 1983 until 2018. Before we left the islands we had an opportunity to see the eruption at work. We left at dusk on a small ocean-going boat that took us down the coast. As the sun set, the waves that bounced us around were filled with sparkling lights flashing in the water as it splashed against the boat. Our daughter Amy was gleeful because it was like a roller coaster ride.

Finally we began to approach the point where the lava was flowing into the water. It was a dark night. There was a snake trail of red-orange coming down the slope, while several sites along the rocky edge had molten water falls into the surf below. We could feel the heat. What I also felt was **awe!**

It felt to me like I was entering the dawn of creation. I was somehow present as God was in the act of creating the universe. I felt like I knew **whose** I was. I somehow belonged to the God of creation.

With this festival of light that we experience on this night, we are called to recognize our kinship with a God of fire and of worlds begotten. But it is not only a creating God, but a God, who gives up himself or herself in a consuming fire.

Fr. Keating has a passage where he sees the light of the paschal candle as a symbol of the profound love that originates in God's own love. It begins with a single point. The fire is lit and then the paschal candle is lit. All the rest of the light that fills a church full of hand candles – it all originates in the one flame. As the light of God's love is spread and flourishes, the original flame does not diminish.¹

Annie Dillard relates a similar awesome image of fire, but this one an intimate picture.

One night she was quietly soaking in the wonders of the creation about her and she saw a moth fly into a candle flame. The moth was caught by the fire, consumed and held. Its wings were immediately ignited like tissue paper, and in an instant they were gone. Most of the moth was quickly consumed, except that there was a shell, a skeleton, there in the bit of the flame. “And that skeleton began to act as a wick. The wax rose in the moth body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole, where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk.” ²

This night calls us into relationship with a God who gives all that there is in the divine in order to be in relation to this humble world. The fire calls us each by name and gives us the name of our family. It is the family named *Christian*.

1. *The daily reader for contemplative living* March 21 & 22

2. *Holy the Firm* p. 17

Exsultet

At the time of Passover in a Jewish household, a sacred meal is held. It's called a **Seder**. One of the highlights of that meal is a question that is asked by a child. The child asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" When I have lead Seder meals in the past, I have taken particular delight in responding to that question. I say, "I am so glad you asked me that question because that is exactly what I wanted to share tonight.

The answer is the story of the deliverance of Israel from bondage. The answer is our deliverance from bondage. The answer is the powerful answer to, "Who are we? Whose are we?"

That is the story that we share tonight. It is the story of the deliverance of all people from bondage. We hear it put this way in the Exsultet:

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.

The Exsultet we heard **sung** tonight – and all the best stories are **sung** – says in vivid yet mystical language why this night is like no other.

Holy is this night when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away.

This song takes us back to the very origins of human life. This song announces that this is a sacred night. This song announces that tonight we proclaim what it means to be Christian. This song announces for all the world to hear, who we are, and whose we are.

Sacred Story

We have announced then that this is the most important message there is. The story we tell tonight is the most important story there is.

There is space in the liturgy tonight to tell all the fullness of the path from creation to the fulfillment brought about by the resurrection. From the great need for redemption, experienced by our ancient ancestors, and by us on a day-to-day basis, through to the “peace that passes all understanding.” Tracing the story up through the prophets, and finally Jesus rising from the dead and sending us the adventures of a new life in anticipation of the final fulfillment.

A woman named Gretchen Pritchard has been telling the sacred story aimed at Episcopalians, especially young Episcopalians, for several decades. I was gifted many years ago with a transcript of her version of the entire Bible told in language appropriate for children . It begins, “**Once upon a time**”. End it ends with, “**the prince and princess get married, and live happily ever after**”. Amazingly, that is a pretty good approximation of the first chapter of Genesis, and the last chapter of the book of Revelation.

At a number of Easter Vigils that I have officiated through the years, we have read that text from Gretchen Pritchard. It is poignant because it helps us keep the very large perspective that this night gives us.

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

We are here tonight in Florida in the year of our Lord 2024. But this night takes us back through the millennia to every deliverance experienced by

humankind. We are there as well tonight. How holy is this night. - #
Baptism

By very ancient custom, this is the night that is most appropriate for baptisms. The baptism of stepping into the pool of water, having shed the clothing of an old life, and emerging, dripping, from the pool, into the new life and new clothes of life in Christ. Our life as Christians begins with that ancient movement.

It is often quoted that we are an Easter people. We are a people who are made out of the consequences of Jesus's Resurrection. We are a people, not just individuals, but a family with the name of Christian. By tradition, baptism was a time when we received a name. Who we are. At the same time we gained a family. Whose we are. Baptism shows us that we are God's people.

Eucharist

I heard a kind of parable many many years ago that told the story of how orthodox Christians understand the basic sacraments of our life as Christians. It was said that when a child is born, there are three basic actions one must take for the sake of the child:

1. first, the child is washed, wrapped in clothes, and given a name.
2. second, the child is fed.
3. third, the child is sheltered and given a home.

These three actions correspond it was said with - baptism, - Eucharist and - confirmation.

Washed in the waters of new life. Fed with the bread of life. And sheltered by the gift of the Spirit.

In the orthodox tradition, all three of those things happen at the same time. So tonight, we hear the sacred story, we see and hear how baptism is the basic calling for all of us, and we are nourished in the sacred body and blood of Christ.

Closing

This liturgy is the first Eucharist of Easter. This liturgy is the third part of one continuous service lasting from Thursday to Saturday night. There are no dismissals after the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. What we do here tonight tells a very big story, the biggest of all. It spans the final meal of Jesus with his disciples, the trial and passion of our Lord, and his emergence from the tomb. This night tells the whole story of what it means to be Christian.

Tonight we travel from the dawn of creation: Fire. Through the waters of deliverance: Water. Through to the dawn of a new life in the People of God: Eucharist. This night is truly like no other night.