**“In the Darkness, a fire is kindled…”**

A Homily for the Great Vigil of Easter

Easter Eve, April 4, 2015

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“In the darkness, fire is kindled…”

Tonight, as our ancestors have done since the beginning of human history, we gather around a fire. Like the call of the Shofar – the ram’s horn – that draws our Jewish brothers and sisters to gather for worship, we are drawn by the Paschal fire. It’s a most basic human instinct to go to a fire: the desire for warmth, the desire for light compels us to move towards it. And as we respond to those instincts, as we meet those basic human needs, we meet another basic human need: the need for community, to share our lives with others, to be together amidst the darkness.

We call this service tonight a vigil. Many of you have probably attended vigils before – vigils for peace, vigils of protest, vigils to mourn. Vigil gather human beings across all kinds of differences, usually around a fire, or at least candles, to demonstrate unity. Unity in a particular mission or cause or sentiment. To proclaim to each other and to the world that we do not mourn or protest or yearn for peace alone.

But vigils don’t just gather community for the sake of comfort. Vigils gather people into community to be in solidarity with each other: to strengthen each other. The word “vigil” itself comes from the Latin root *vigilia*, meaning “a watch” or “watchfulness”. But the Latin word derives from an ancient Indo-European root “weg” meaning “to be lively, or active, to be strong.” Vigils are not passive events. They gather community around the fire not for solace only, but for strength – to take the darkness and transform it into heat and light.

Vigils are called for the purpose of seeking liberation – from sorrow, from oppression, from isolation, from shame, from despair. At most contemporary vigils, we anticipate the future we wish to see. The restored future. The redeemed future. The joy that cometh in the morning. At these vigils, the community anticipates that more perfect future by testifying about the present and how broken, how unjust, how tragic it is. The testimony of the speakers and the affirmation of the community gathered renews in everyone a commitment to imagine, envision, and enact the future of which we dream.

But our vigil tonight, is a different. We do gather to seek liberation. But we do so not by bemoaning our present, but by telling stories about the imperfect past, and how God has brought liberation again and again when it seemed that darkness would reign forever. We tell stories of empty voids liberated into form and structure and function. We tell stories about nations of slaves, oppressed and abused, liberated and set onto the journey towards freedom. We tell stories about dry, lifeless bones – a metaphor for the tired, scattered and worn out people of God -- liberated from spiritual death and re-gathered into a faithful nation of holy men and women.

And we don’t just tell these stories as if they were events that happened long ago. Tonight we proclaim that “This is the night…” Again and again in the Exsultet, the prayer sung by Robert, we hear “This is the night”…when God led our forbearers the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. This is the night when God liberated the chaos and formed heaven and earth. This is the night when the worn out people of God were re-animated by the divine breath and given new life. Not in ages past. But now. Here. Tonight.

And not just them. Not “those people”. But us. You and I. Somehow in the mystery of our liturgy, we become the ones liberated from Egypt and carried through the Red Sea on dry land. We are the ones whose deep chaos has been given shape and order. We are the ones into whom God has breathed new life, new faith, and new hope. We, you and I. Here. Tonight.

For our vigil is an Easter vigil, and the community drawn by tonight’s fire crosses not just human boundaries of culture and class and gender and age, but the boundaries of space and time on heaven and on earth. Liturgy has the power to do this - to gather around the Paschal fire a community of spiritual ancestors and descendants that extends deep into the past, and far into the future.

Each of us brings to this new fire tonight our own little box of darkness. And maybe it’s not so little. We bring our own chaos, our own enslavement, our own dry bones. Perhaps you think that only you know what your darkness looks like. Perhaps you think that no one shares your darkness. It may be true that your darkness is unique. But it is not true that it is unknown.

All darkness seeks the light. And the darkness within each one of us yearns to draw near to the light of Christ. For God knows about all the darkness. In Christ, God experiences the ultimate darkness, the darkness of rejection and of descent into the dead. And even that darkness cannot extinguish the flame of God’s love.

For tonight, at this vigil, and gathered with each other here in this place, gathered with our ancestors in faith through all of history, gathered with the communion of saints, with all the holy angels, and indeed, with Christ himself – we proclaim the power of God to break the bonds of death and hell and to rise victorious from the grave. Tonight we don’t just remember Jesus’ rising, we share in it. Gathered together, around this marvelous and holy flame, we watch and wait, and listen and remember the liberating power of God to drive away all darkness. And Christ rises from the tomb, we offer our own darkness into the fire, where it may burn, and glow, and be changed and, like the smoke, arise. Amen.