

Sermon: Easter Vigil | April 8, 2023

Genesis 1:1–2:2, Exodus 14:10–15:1, Isaiah 55:1-11, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Zephaniah 3.14-20

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If it wasn't for this night, Christianity wouldn't exist. If it wasn't for that which was accomplished through the dark hours of this night into the dawn of the next morning, the church wouldn't exist. We wouldn't be here.

But praise be to God, that this night came through. Praise be to God that Christ's death on the cross was not the end of the story. We have journeyed through betrayal, sorrow, and grief through the liturgies of this past week. And tonight, we will plough our way through this darkness into an unexpected but amazing and glorious new hope.

Tonight, there are four parts to our service: the service of Lights, where we lit the paschal candle at the beginning of the service and processed into the church; the service of Lessons, where we've just heard a number of Old Testament readings; then there will be the renewal of baptismal vows; and finally, we'll celebrate the first eucharistic communion of Easter.

This liturgy is a journey, a passage, a passing over from despair to hope, from death to life. In fact, in many Christian traditions tonight's liturgy is called the *Pascha* a translation of the word Passover. Because what is happening tonight reminds us of the Passover in the history of Israel, when the angel passed over them and spared them death, and when the Israelites eventually passed from bondage to freedom.

We heard five Old Testament lessons tonight. Each of the lessons we heard is a sort of passing over. In the book of Genesis, through God's act of creation we pass over from nothingness to existence. God creates the world, the plants, creatures, and humans and calls it good. We passed over from absolute void and

emptiness into a creation bursting forth with life. In that Genesis account we hear the first blessing of God: be fruitful and multiply- flourish. May we always thank God that we are, that we exist, that we are present and not absent. May we never take our presence for granted for in God's infinite wisdom each of us add beauty and flourishing to God's creation. Created in God's image and likeness each of us reflects the glory of God in unique ways. From nothing to something, something valuable and beautiful, and so we praise God.

In the Exodus reading we hear of another passing over. The story opens with the Israelites in a very dangerous situation. Pharaoh had let them leave Egypt, but they soon find themselves being chased by his army. Exodus records: "As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord." Panic stricken as they were, certain of their death, God who had been leading them from the front, now goes and stands between the raiding army and the Israelites. God stands as a guard in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. That pillar stands as a barrier between the army and Israelites and all through that night God sends a wind to drive back the waters, that enables the Israelites to cross on dry land. That crossing was a passing over from a certain death to life.

The fact that God was with them in the pillar of cloud and fire is symbolized in our liturgies with the paschal candle. That candle is a symbol of the risen Christ leading us in that passing over into life, the flame reminding us of the pillar of fire that led the Israelites. That pillar led the way for the Israelites and guarded them in their journey. May that lit paschal candle always remind us that the resurrected Christ is always leading

us through our lives' journey, even through the most difficult and trying times.

The third and fourth readings tonight were from Isaiah and Ezekiel. Both these scriptures speak of a passing from exile to return and restoration. These scriptures offer an invitation to all, especially those who have completely lost hope, those who believe nothing good can now come. Isaiah calls out to everyone who is thirsty, everyone whose throat is parched. He invites them to come to the waters of hope and salvation. He says even if you think you don't have what it takes to see the other side of this passing over, come and don't let your limitation keep you from experiencing the goodness and blessings of God. The prophet writes, "you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." These blessings of God are not limited by our lack. Even if we consider ourselves incapable of this passing over to hope and life, God invites us to come. That's because God says, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." And about his promise to bless his people God says that his words shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which he purposes.

Ezekiel too sees a passing over from exile and a return to homeland. He sees a vision of dry bones being brought to life by the Spirit of God. This was a passing from complete annihilation to life again. When all hope had been lost and buried in a grave, God asks Ezekiel to prophesy that he would split open the graves to bring life. Ezekiel writes, "Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel." At the beginning of that vision God asks Ezekiel "Can these bones live?" It seemed impossible. But

through that vision God was promising life even in the most dry and dead situation. This night we remember the grave of Jesus that opened. The stone over the tomb rolled away and Jesus risen to life. Even when it seems impossible, Ezekiel reminds that God can bring about a passing over from death to life.

The final reading this night has been from the prophet Zephaniah who for most of his prophecy talks of judgement and calamity on Jerusalem because of its sins. But at the end of his short book, the prophet changes tone. The passage we heard this night starts with the words: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" Sing, shout, rejoice and exult! In this prophetic book we see a passing over from judgement and its accompanying sorrow to restoration and joy! The disciples, followers, and family of Jesus would have been in deep despair and grief on that first Saturday night of the passion. But something incredible that night was going to turn their sorrow into joy.

That event which turns sorrow into joy is what we celebrate here tonight my fellow believers. We celebrate Christ's resurrection, the victory of life over death. We celebrate that victory because we share in that victory over death. The Exsultet or Easter proclamation was sung tonight at the beginning of the service as the paschal candle was brought into the church. One of the lines of the Exsultet reads: "How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and humanity is reconciled to God." This is the great passing over- when earth is joined to heaven, when humanity is reconciled to God. This Pascha night we rejoice and celebrate that great passing over. Come, let us pass over together! Amen!