

The Great Vigil of Easter
April 15, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

Genesis 1:1-2:4a
Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21
Canticle 8: The Song of Moses
Ezekiel 36:24-28
Psalm 42
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 143
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalm 98

Romans 6:3-11
Psalm 114
Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen. *The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Earlier this evening while we awaited the sunset and the beginning of the new day, the third day after Jesus was crucified, we heard the record of God's saving deeds in history. Those five readings were, of course, just an abbreviated summary of all that God had done for his people and the world, but they provide a foundation for our excitement when we celebrate the first mass of Easter. Let's look at why.

Our first reading was the account of the creation. We are not certain of the authorship of Genesis. Many think it was Moses, but whoever it was, he was clearly not an eyewitness. Adam and Eve were not created until the sixth day. But whoever recorded the event was inspired by God to do so as St. Paul reminds us in his second letter to Timothy when he wrote that "all Scripture is God-breathed."

An important thing to learn from the creation account is that God created by speaking. "God said, 'let there be light,' and there was light." "God said, 'let the earth bring forth living creatures in their kind,' ... and it was so." There is power in the word of God. All he has to do is speak, and it happens.

Our second reading was the account of crossing the Red Sea. Again there is a demonstration of the power of God. God led the people out of Egypt and they found themselves trapped between the sea and the most powerful army in the world at that time. But God defended his people and created an escape for them through the sea on dry land. God has power and control over absolutely everything – the sea, the wind, powerful armies – all act according to God's plan. All he has to do is "will" it to be so, and it is.

Our third reading was the account of God sprinkling his people with the Water of Life. Ezekiel was prophesying, speaking the words given to him by God for God's people, that even though they had sinned and had been taken away into slavery as punishment, God would still rescue them. God said he would "sprinkle clean water" on them, and the stain of sin would be removed. He was telling them and us that he can and will rescue us from sin, that he will save us.

Our fourth reading is the account of the Valley of the Dry Bones. If he can restore dry bones to life, he can heal the worst sinner and restore him or her to right relationship with himself. But the bigger matter here is that he called on Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. "And he said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'" The Lord restored life to the dry bones, not Ezekiel, but God invited him to help. Ezekiel had the privilege of participating in the work of the Lord. He was invited to be a partner with God.

Our fifth reading is the account of Jerusalem praising God. Zephaniah is prophesying what God will do in the end times. "The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil." Trust in God brings hope, hope for a future with God, and a hope that all that was lost will be restored.

These five readings tell us that when God speaks, things happen; that God's will is perfect even when disaster seems imminent; that God saves us from sin; that God invites us to partner with him in his work; and that God offers us hope because we can know in advance what the end will be like when it happens.

God is powerful to accomplish what he wills and rescue us from our own shortcomings. He is not a distant, far-off entity but one who invites us to work closely with him and provides hope for a certain future.

So now that we know more about who our God is, what he can do, and what his purpose is for us, we can better appreciate what happened on Easter. Let's look again at what we heard read from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

[pause]

Clear as mud, right? Let's take this apart a bit to understand what Paul is saying. The penalty for sin is death. Whether you were a mass murderer or stole a paper clip, the penalty for sin is death. But Jesus said, wait. I will take the punishment for this guilty person's sin myself. I will die in his place so that he may continue to live. That's what it means to be baptized into his death. When we joined the Church through baptism, we were buried with Christ. That means our sins were paid for. We need to define our terms. In this context, infant baptism must be coupled with Confirmation. Infant baptism by itself does not save anyone from anything.

When a baptized infant becomes old enough to affirm his own faith and understand his own salvation through the death of Jesus, then we have a proper understanding of what it means to be baptized into his death. We are brought into a state of forgiveness of sin, we are saved, by Jesus' death. And because he rose on that first Easter, we will rise from death also and live on with God forever.

Our gospel reading presents the fact of the resurrection. Early Sunday morning, which was the third day, the women found his body was gone and an angel told them Jesus had risen. Easter is not about a theological idea. It actually happened. In addition to the eyewitness accounts, we have thousands of years of historical data to back up the event. We saw that God just speaks things into existence. His perfect will has the power to control nature and conquer powerful armies. He has shown us that he has the power to save us from spiritual ruin as well as physical calamities. He has offered us an invitation to walk and work with him. And his resurrection proves that we can have hope in his promises, the greatest of which is found in the gospel of John: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Alleluia! Christ is risen. *The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.