



April 2015

Volume 88 Number 4

Dear Friends,

Full Disclosure The Episcopal Church is a Full Disclosure denomination. We do not marry a couple until we have explained our understanding of the history, meaning, purpose, and core elements of marriage. And even after doing that, we do not proceed until we establish publically that no one knows of any legal impediment, and then we basically ask the couple one last time, “Are you sure you really want to do this?” The service may be very personal, but it is by no means private.

Similarly, we do not baptize anyone until we spell out in some detail what we understand baptism to mean, to offer, and to require. Only after giving fair, public warning in The Baptismal Covenant do we move over to the font and do the actual baptism. We want to be sure that everyone—the candidate (or their family acting on their behalf) and the congregation—knows what they are getting into.

So if you want to know what the Episcopal Church believes about death, read the Burial office in the Prayer Book. If you want to know why we have clergy and what are their special duties, authority, and responsibilities (and where they come from), read the Ordination services. If you think we are really basically good people, read the Confession in any of the principal services, or, even better and much more specific, the Litany of Penitence from the Ash Wednesday liturgy (p. 267)¹. And if you think anyone has put themselves beyond God’s love and forgiveness, read the Absolution which comes after each of the Confessions.

It may be that a seminary education helps one to hear more easily some of the subtleties and nuances of some of the phrasing, but basically what we believe is set forth in plain English in *The Book of Common Prayer* and read regularly aloud in front of everyone who has come to hear. There is

¹ Not to be confused with the longer Great Litany which we offer at the beginning of Advent and Lent.

no secret knowledge, there are no esoteric rites only to be witnessed by elite insiders, there is no information hidden from general view.²

Telling the whole story In that spirit of full disclosure, once a year we recount a series of representative stories and passages to present, at one sitting, the core elements of our lives and our relationship with God. Most of the year we only get little bits and pieces—a single story about Jesus, a snippet of the Hebrew Scriptures, a paragraph or two from the middle of a long and complicated response St. Paul offers in reply to specific questions or circumstances, and, if we are fortunate, maybe the entire text of one of the 150 psalms. It is all good stuff, but it is like hearing a Beethoven symphony in weekly three-minute sections extending over a number of months with some parts skipped over because the editors did not like them.

On the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Translation of the Bible (2011), the Globe Theatre in London organized a cover-to-cover reading of that version of the Bible which extended from Palm Sunday all the way through to Easter Day.

We will not replicate that event at St. Elizabeth's—at least not this year—but we will offer, on the night before Easter, a comprehensive overview of our understanding of who God is, what God does, and how we fit in. This overview is the service we call The Easter Vigil. It could go on all night, and in some locations and traditions it does, but the liturgy as we present it will take somewhere between one and two hours.

Fire and light in the midst of darkness We start, echoing the nothingness which preceded God's creation, outside in absolute darkness (except for the effect of a nearby street light...). Striking steel on a rod of flint, I generate a shower of sparks which, if all goes according to plan, kindles a fire representing God's initial command, "Let there be light." From that fire we light the nearly 4-foot tall Paschal Candle, and by the light of that single wick, we all process into the darkened church as our Music Director and Choirmaster Garah Landes carries the light and utters the first music of the season. The text of what he sings simply describes the light that he bears: "The Light of Christ" he intones, and we all respond, "Thanks be to God." Two more times Garah repeats that declaration, and each time we make the same response.

To light, add music As we file into the pews, the entire church still illuminated only by that single candle, our soprano soloist Anastasia Swope steps into that sphere of light and begins to offer the shimmering, eerie beauty of The Exsultet, the ancient Easter Vigil chant. The sweeping, haunting line of the music seems from another age and another place. It serves to transport us from the ordinary into something else—a time out of time and a place that floats apart from any particular location. The music is beautiful and strange—to our ears it is unfamiliar and that is intentional. We are stepping out of the usual into a contemplation of the eternal, and the chant is our guide.

Anastasia becomes the means by which light becomes music—the rising and falling of her voice evokes the mysterious progress of the earliest emergence of Creation from God's commands. And as her voice fills the space, we take the light from that one, central Paschal candle, and pass it throughout the congregation, each one lighting their candle and then passing the light to their neighbor. Everyone's light comes from a single source; most of us get our light from someone close to us. Like the tradition of the Church, we receive our light from someone who, in turn, has received it from someone else, back to the single "Light of Christ" Garah brought into the church in the beginning. No one makes their own fire.

² At St. Elizabeth's we carry this principle over to our financial life as well—nothing in our parish budget is confidential or restricted.

The light and the music go hand in hand, each partnering with the other to replace darkness and silence with light—the shared work of many—and music—in this instance the defined work of one. Anastasia brings her great artistic gifts to this offering, but she does not make up either the words or the music. Like those passing the light, she delivers what she has also received.

The words she sings invite us to rejoice in the gift of light, and then they go on to describe how God's intent, while beginning with light, grew into the wonderful complexity of material creation and then into the continually unfolding story of the often difficult relationship between God and the people God made and chose. The Exsultet functions almost as does an overture in musical theatre—it describes in brief summary form what will be set forth in greater detail as the liturgy unfolds.

And then the stories...The largest portion of the liturgy is a series of readings from Scripture, beginning at the very start, with the account of Creation in the first chapter of Genesis. I often think of this reading as going back to the darkness and the fire we experienced at the beginning of the service and filling in the meaning to the experience we have already had. I think of Genesis 1 more as wisdom than science—its value is not so much in physical details as in the meaning that they are intended to convey: at the heart of Creation is order (and maybe orders) given by God.

Indeed, without order, what we blithely term “the laws of nature” (as if they somewhere were inevitable and sprang from nothing) could not exist. It is God's creation of order, and God's order of creation, which make science possible. Without the consistent behavior of the elements and their component parts, chemistry would be impossible, and without such seeming constants as gravity and the speed of light, even post-modern physics and cosmology might be significantly compromised. The profound and the simple can both enter into Genesis 1 with awe and delight.

Nature, and human nature But Creation is not an exhibit in a science fair. Alongside the great beauty and regularity of the natural order, we find the turbulent and willful hearts of humanity. And so the stories continue. We hear of Noah and his ark—a tale never appointed for regular Sunday morning reading in our lectionary. Some years we continue with the harrowing tale of the binding of Isaac, other years we move directly on to the hair's breadth escape of Moses and the Hebrews fleeing to freedom before the murderous charge of the strongest army of the strongest superpower of their day. For the next twenty minutes or so we hear a succession of tales of fear and deliverance, of loss and longing, of despair and restoration, and all read in the flickering candlelight of a mostly darkened church. They are not exactly tales around a campfire, but they are stories read by the same light in which they were first written two, or even three, thousand years ago.

It is a night in which God almost comes to take us each by the hand and whisk us back to the beginning of everything, and then, jumping from age to age, brings us up to the time of Jesus. If Charles Dickens were ever to have written a book entitled *An Easter Carol*, it might have been something like the Easter Vigil in its structure. Perhaps implicit in most of the lessons is a contrast between the life which God has always intended for us, and the mess we have made of the gift by thinking that we know better how to use it. By the end of the lessons, the gap between what God promises and intends, and what we experience is vast, undeniable, and deeply discouraging. In the face of loss and suffering, to talk of love and joy seems either hopelessly naive or almost pathologically insensitive.

And so ends something like the first act of the Vigil drama.

The second act In the second act of the liturgy, we begin to see if there is any way out of our current distress. We start that work by repeating our core beliefs, and then proceeding to our

understanding of the nature of the life which flows from those beliefs—we say together the Baptismal Covenant. Importantly, the Baptismal Covenant begins with the simple invitation to renounce evil and to turn to God as we have seen him in Jesus. From that one choice, everything else flows—our understanding of who God is and how God works, and our deeply related understanding of the elements of a healthy life both for individuals and for communities.

That question—do we renounce evil and turn to Jesus—is the hinge of the service, and, because the service intends to have a larger dimension, is similarly the key question of our lives. Renouncing evil but not turning to Jesus seems to have little staying power as we are left with a vacuum in ourselves which we then fill from any of a number of sources, none of them finally delivering the life they promise or we desire. It seems equally ineffective to try to turn to Jesus without definitively acknowledging the futility of seeking full and healthy lives by depending primarily on our own judgment and desires. No one can serve two masters, Jesus says. Perhaps spiritual maturity begins with the recognition that we have to make a choice, alas an exclusive choice, about how we will seek to order our lives. Anyone who has been married recognizes that to reach what we most desire often requires denying what we used to want. The one who seeks to be intimate with everyone achieves that with no one. If we would have the life with God which God offers, we must choose, and not just occasionally date, God. That choice marks the beginning of the Baptismal Covenant.

The Culmination In some ways the placement of the Baptismal Covenant serves to slow down the narrative and defer—if only briefly—the final act of the drama of the Vigil. After the short prayer at the end of the Covenant, we declare that “Christ is risen” and make the transition from Lent to Easter: the lights come up, we light all the candles on the altar, we replace our Lenten vestments with our Easter colors, and we sing a hymn to mark and celebrate the movement from a season of penitence and preparation to a time of celebration and joy.

The proclamation of the Resurrection precedes the narrative which describes it. This sequence in the liturgy reflects the historical relationship between the Resurrection and the Gospels. The Gospels were probably written two or three decades after the events they describe to seek to make sense of what had already happened, and so in the Vigil we proclaim the Resurrection, and then we double back to the Gospel reading to describe what happened.

In that Gospel reading we hear Matthew’s account of the Marys going to the tomb, we hear their dialogue there with the angel who announces the Resurrection, and then we see their actual meeting with the risen Christ, who gives them a message to take back to the disciples about what is to happen next.³

Seen within the context of all of the Old Testament stories from the first section of the Vigil, the Resurrection is not so much an anomaly as the resolution of the tension between God’s power, goodness, and intent on one side, and error, sin, and death on the other. If you’ve been paying attention, it might come as a relief, but should not be such a great surprise. As so often happens with God, what God offers is not exactly what we might have hoped for (basically, we would rather be immortal than die and be raised) but fulfills the promise perhaps better than anything we might have devised on our own.

³ Interestingly, though the angel invites the women to see the empty tomb for themselves, there is no actual account of their either looking, or going, in. This element is reminiscent of Thomas’ second encounter with the risen Christ near the end of the Gospel of John. There, Jesus invites Thomas to do the physical tests he had said he would require in order to believe—placing his hands in the wounds—but, with the risen Christ standing before him, Thomas no longer seems to need to do those things in order to believe. In each case belief seems to come apart from physical proof affirmed by the usual senses.

In some sense once we hear that God has raised Jesus from the dead, the story is over—Christ has died and Christ has risen. But for the story *really* to be over, Christ must come again, and that is what happens next.

Climax or epilogue? At this point, the Easter Vigil begins to look like a festive, but not unusual, Eucharist. We move to the altar and the Celebrant begins the prayer of consecration which, after a brief recap of what comes before, takes us to that Upper Room where we join Jesus at the table “on the night in which he was betrayed.” And there and then we hear the words he used to sum up his work and ministry among us. Having just, moments before, been dazzled by the risen Christ, we are now back three days before with the hard work still ahead.

So why the twisted chronology? As Genesis 1 may be more wisdom than science, perhaps the Last Supper is more about meaning than history. The Resurrection is what makes the Last Supper significant. But for the Resurrection, Jesus’ taking the bread and the wine, declaring them to be his body and blood, and commanding us to repeat that act [“do this”] might have been no more than memorable drama.

But the purpose of our remembering is not to glorify Jesus, or somehow for us to negate the effect of his death by our faithfulness. The purpose of the remembering, coupled with the taking of the bread which has become more than bread, and the wine which is no longer simply wine, is for our hearts, minds, and spirits to be changed by this complex encounter. We pray that Christ may dwell in us—that we might become more Christ-like through our focused contemplation of his work and the experience of his presence in the material substance of the bread and wine. We also pray that we may dwell in him, that is, that we might escape the limits of this life and find ourselves, in ways that surpass understanding, living in and through Jesus.

Whose story is it? So although this phase of the story has been mostly about Jesus, we tell the story so that we might be changed. If we remain outside of the story, and think it is only about Jesus, then I suspect we have missed the point.

All of the elements of the Vigil—the fire, the candles, the music, the sequence of lessons, the transition to Easter, and the gathering around the table point towards the last words, the Dismissal. We, transformed by the stories that become one story, are to go back to our lives in peace to love and serve the Lord. And in the Easter season we usually add “Alleluia, alleluia,” which literally means something like “praise God, praise God.” And we utter that praise out of the recognition, conveyed by all those stories and symbolic acts, of the identity God has given us, of the life for which we have been made, and for the life which is ours to experience here and enter into eternally hereafter.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett