



race Church

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Rector

COMMENTARY ON HOLY SCRIPTURE

Easter Vigil, April 4, 2015

First Reading: The Story of Creation (Genesis chapter 1)

“In the beginning...” So it begins, the story of God’s creation, redemption and restoration/new creation, as told in our sacred scriptures, both old and new, Hebrew and Greek.

It begins in the beginning, with the creation of the cosmos, at a time before time, a place before space, when the earth and all the universe was not—was nothing, a “formless void.” *Ex nihilo*, out of nothing—and needing nothing—God made this universe. No need, but the motive of love, and the very nature of God to be creative. It begins with an image of a wind or breath of God sweeping over a dark sea. You can almost hear the rustling of the Holy Spirit as she flies close above the waters. And then the final person of the Trinity comes to the action: the word of God: light. And there was light, day, distinct from the darkness. And there was time, a first day. And so the story begins.

There are five more days of creation and seventh day for rest. We haven’t reached that day yet—the day of God’s peace. We are still in the midst of time, of creation, of time falling and time passing and of the continued need for God’s love and creative power. And there has come a time when we need to be saved from ourselves. We need God’s hand to continue to be active, God’s word to speak truth and mercy to us, God’s Holy Spirit to lift us to a new and restored creation. Some day.

Second Reading: Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis chapter 22)

It has come to this: humankind has already proven untrustworthy and rebellious. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the generation of Noah—and the generations after; something in them itched in rebellion and erupted in violence. What was God to do? A new plan—to work through a new people, the descendants of Abraham. To him was the promise given: descendants as numerous as the stars, a land and the opportunity to become a blessing to all nations. Would he pass the test and prove faithful?

There can be no harder test: take your son, your only and beloved son Isaac, the promised one, and sacrifice him to God on the holy mountain. How barbaric we think. Of course—and it was barbarous time, when human sacrifices were not unusual. But we must be distracted by our moral abhorrence of the very idea of asking for a child to be sacrificed on an altar to appease a mysterious and bloodthirsty God. Especially not in a time when we see that we are no less barbarous around the world, recruiting children to fight, to die even to sacrifice themselves for the sake of some supposed greater good.

The point now is to focus on the response of both Abraham and Isaac—neither of whom protested their fate. They simply obeyed—asking questions along the way, but willing to go and bind and be bound, to prepare to kill and to die. Trusting without any way of knowing that God would provide a way. And God did. So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide” as it is said, on the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” And so tradition identifies that place with Calvary to this very day.

Third Reading: Israel's Deliverance at the Red Sea (Exodus Chapters 14 and 15)

I think it was the great Satchel Paige who said, don't look back, something might be gaining on you. Well, “As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them.”

They panicked but Moses calmed them down—though he was pretty nervous too. But God told him to remember what happened back in Egypt and the wonders God had done then through Moses. Now it was time to use that staff again: stretch your arm toward the sea—and watch the waters part. The Israelites got through, but the armies of the Pharaoh got stuck and the soldiers drowned as the water returned. Their panic must have been even greater than that of the Israelites looking back. But they had no Moses to calm them, no God to protect them. They were fighting on the wrong

side, against God—and that is never a wise thing to do.

They thought they held all the cards: armor, chariots, advanced weapons, trained soldiers. They rolled out at the command of the most powerful human being on earth, a living god, Pharaoh—pyramids to the Pharaohs were a reminder of their ancient rule. They thought they were chasing down escaping slaves, they were angry about their leaving with all the silver and gold they could grab, after claiming responsibility for catastrophe after catastrophe, including the sudden death of so many firstborn sons. They wanted to kill them. And no human power on earth could stop them.

No human power did. It was the LORD who triumphed gloriously. So Miriam and the other women shook their tambourines and sang and danced that night. The journey ahead would be long and dangerous. But God was with them. And our God is mighty God, horse and rider has he thrown into the sea.

Fourth Reading: Learn Wisdom and Live (Proverbs chapters 8 and 9)

Wisdom is a woman, in both Hebrew and Greek nouns: *hokmah* and *sophia*. *Hagia Sophia*, Holy Wisdom, the name of the greatest church of Byzantium, is now a great mosque in Istanbul. But though the name of the gates change, wisdom remains the same. Whether on the heights or at the cross roads, wisdom can be found. And her cry is a heartfelt invitation: listen, learn, practice my way, and live. Walk in the way of wisdom and righteousness and you will go far. Turn aside and you will go astray, wander in the wilderness, and die an early death.

To hear this at a young age and take it to heart is a wonderful thing. A great deal of fruitless travail and the search for happiness in foolish and material things might be avoided. Of course, most people need a few dead ends and broken hearts and empty dreams before they wake up and smell wisdom's coffee. But when they do, there it is, still sold for the price of stopping to listen. But earned at the cost of a lifetime of practice.

Fifth Reading: A New Heart and a New Spirit (Ezekiel chapter 36)

This is one of cornerstone passages in the Hebrew prophets—which of course is why it is among the selected readings. A new heart and a new spirit I will put in you, says the LORD to the dispirited and exiled Israelites—and to all the peoples of the world, scattered around and stony of heart. It is very similar to a passage in Jeremiah 31 and harks back in its own way to Deuteronomy 30 where Moses said God will circumcise the hearts of the people. I preached on this

theme during Lent as the fifth covenant, the covenant of the heart through the Holy Spirit.

For we believe as Christians that this promise has been fulfilled—or is being fulfilled through the coming of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Now think about what we have heard in these readings, the plot of the story. God made us and loves us. But we wander astray, act foolishly and sinfully. God keeps after us, sending leaders and prophets, laws and wisdom to help lead us. Finally as we believe, God sent the Word of God, heard at the beginning to come among us and to be an example and an atoning sacrifice for us, and the Spirit of God, present at creation to write on our hearts, to guide and comfort us. What goodness and mercy God shows in this salvation history. How great is God's love and our debt? How much must we praise and thank God? For we were lost and now are found, blind but now we see. Amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me, that redeemed a people like us, that gives us a world of beauty, and to humanity, a unique power of thought and freedom of choice. Let us use what god has given for the purpose for which it was given: to love and care for the earth and each other, and to continue God's mission of restoration and new creation.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

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